The Morgan Trail

by W. C. Tuttle

A Hashknife Hartley Story

THE MORGAN TRAIL

A Story of Hashknife Hartley

By W. C. Tuttle

REX MORGAN knew little about his family history. After his mother died he had nothing to go on except a check that had come from Mesa City, Arizona, signed with an illegible scrawl. Rex followed the clue of the check into the midst of a perplexing and dangerous situation, involving a murder, a beautiful girl, and a deadly feud. It is at this point that Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens enter the story and, by their ingenuity, courage, and resourcefulness, unravel the tangled threads of mystery.

W. C. Tuttle is the son of an old-time frontier sheriff and writes from first-hand knowledge of the old West. His new novel has all the elements of mystery, romance, and adventure that made its predecessor, 'Thicker than Water,' so popular.

THE MORGAN TRAIL

W. C. Tuttle

O.P. 9/5/41

REFERENCE LIBRARY OF
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
2 PARK STREET, BOSTON

NOT TO BE TAKEN FROM THE SHELVES
EXCEPT BY PERMISSION OF
THE LIBRARIAN

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS.
Archive
Collection

This book may not leave the Offices
and if borrowed must be returned within 7 days

THE MORGAN TRAIL

W. C. TUTTLE

THE MORGAN TRAIL

A Story of Hashknife Hartley

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston and New York
1928

COPYRIGHT, 1928, BY WILBUR C. TUTTLE

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

CONTENTS

I.	Realization and a Job	1
II.	The Fighting Nesters	17
III.	The Deadline	39
IV.	Sorrowing Cowboys	47
V.	Rex Gets a Ride	56
VI.	Shifting the Evidence	70
VII.	Hashknife and Sleepy Drift In	93
VIII.	Rex Uses his Brains	104
IX.	'Kind of a Misfit'	117
X.	Lynch Lawyers	141
XI.	The Navajo Rug	166
XII.	An Empty Safe	189
XIII.	A Slide for Life	211
XIV.	Saved by Condensed Milk	222
XV.	The Cave Man	232
XVI.	Hashknife Sings a Song	248
XVII.	Buzzards	257
XVIII.	The Man in the Black Mask	269
XIX.	Hashknife Writes a Note	283
XX.	In the Smoke of a Forty-Five	293

THE MORGAN TRAIL

CHAPTER I

REALIZATION AND A JOB

REX MORGAN came back from his mother's funeral and sat down on the front porch of the little place he had always known as home. He was a slender young man, twenty years of age, with the complexion of a girl, well-moulded features, somber brown eyes, and an unruly mop of black hair.

His black suit was slightly threadbare, the cuffs of his shirt rough-edged from many washings. He smoothed back his hair, staring at the skyline of the little city of Northport, California. It had suddenly occurred to him that he was all alone in the world.

The death of his mother had been a great shock to him. The doctor had said it was heart failure. The rest of it had been a confusion of neighbors, who wanted to assist with everything, the sympathetic minister, the business-like, solemn-faced undertaker, who had talked with him on the price of caskets.

It seemed that there was a difference in price

between sterling silver handles and the plated ones, but Rex did not remember which they had selected. Just now he stared at the skyline and wondered who would pay for everything; because he had suddenly remembered that he had no money.

As far as he knew he was all alone in the world. There were plenty of Morgans, of course, but he had never heard his mother mention one of them as being a relative. He had never given this a thought before. In fact, he had never given anything of that kind any thought.

Mrs. Morgan had always been an enigma to her neighbors. They had seen Rex grow from boyhood to manhood, practically tied to his mother's apron-strings, as they expressed it. He had no companions. She had never allowed him to go to a public school, but had always employed a tutor.

Whence her income was derived, no one knew. But she was not wealthy. On the contrary, Mrs. Morgan practiced the strictest economy in order to make both ends meet. She was a slight little woman, evidently well-bred, who lived solely for her son; shielding him from the world in every way.

She had never told any one anything of her past life. Rex was like her in many respects. Now he was twenty years of age, educated from books — as ignorant of the world as a six-year-old. He did not

know where his money came from. It had never meant anything to him.

In his own dumb sort of way he wondered where this money came from, and if there was any left. Another thing bothered him just a little. A newspaper reporter, writing up the death notice, asked Rex about his father.

'I don't know anything about him,' Rex had replied. 'In fact, I have never heard his name mentioned.'

'Possibly his name was Morgan,' suggested the reporter facetiously. 'Didn't your mother have a marriage certificate?'

'I have never seen it.'

These things bothered him now. It seemed so ridiculous. There had been one man in Northport who had dropped in to see his mother once in a while. Rex knew him to be a Mr. J. E. Blair, an attorney at law. He did not come oftener than once every two or three months, and his visits were of short duration. Rex had never wondered about him, although he had never been present during these short visits.

The death of his mother had been a grand awakening for Rex. All his life he had drifted along, being content to let her guide him in everything, absolutely devoid of any initiative, and now he was like a rudderless ship in a storm.

He looked at his soft, white hands, and a flash of bitterness swept through his soul. He remembered what he had heard a man say one day:

'That Morgan boy is going to grow up to be an educated damn fool.'

He did not understand it at the time — but now he knew. But Rex was not exactly a fool. He had absorbed education as a sponge absorbs water — but to no purpose. He realized that he knew nothing of the world, of people, except what he had learned from books. There was not a single thing he had learned that would fit him for making a living.

His next-door neighbor was coming across the little strip of lawn, and Rex looked at him curiously. His name was Amos Weed, a big, portly man, who owned a grocery store down in the center of the city. They had been neighbors for years, but nothing more than a nod had ever passed between them.

Amos Weed sat down beside Rex, shifted his cigar to the opposite side of his mouth, and considered him thoughtfully.

'Me and the wife have been talkin' about you,' he said. 'Been wonderin' just what you're intendin' to do, young man.'

'Going to do?' Rex lifted his head and looked at Weed.

'Yeah — work.'

'Oh, I hadn't thought about that.'

'I see. Mebby it's none of my business, but are yuh fixed so yuh don't have to work?'

'Why, I — I don't really know.'

'Uh-huh.'

He came over and sat down beside Rex.

'Your mother traded with me a long time,' he said slowly. 'She always paid her bill right on the dot.'

'Well?' queried Rex.

'No, she don't owe me a red cent, young man. Yuh see, none of us ever understood her. We wanted to be neighbors, but she didn't care to mix with us. We didn't understand why she kept yuh so close all the time. Hirin' private teachers and all that. Of course,' quickly, 'it wasn't none of our business. But you've lived here a long time, and folks do get curious.'

'I see,' absently.

'Ain't you got no relations?'

Rex shook his head quickly. 'None that I have ever heard about.'

'Father dead?'

'I don't know,' replied Rex honestly.

'Don't know?'

'Not a thing, Mr. Weed. I have never heard a word about him. My mother never mentioned him to me.'

'Nor to anybody else, I guess.'

'I must have had a father.'

'Chances are, yuh did.'

'Oh, I must have, you know.'

Weed shifted his cigar and looked intently at the sad-eyed young man.

'Are you tryin' to be funny, or are yuh just plain ignorant?'

Rex shook his head. 'No, I'm not trying to be funny.'

'I didn't think yuh was,' dryly. 'But what's your plans?'

'I guess I haven't any.'

'Talkin' cold-turkey, have you any money to live on?'

'None. I haven't a cent.'

'You'll have to get a job, eh?'

'I — I suppose so. But I don't know ——'

'All right. I need a boy to drive a delivery wagon for my grocery. You ought to know this town well enough. I'll pay yuh forty a month — start to-morrow. What do yuh say?'

'Drive a — a horse?'

'Two of 'em.'

'But I have never driven a horse.'

'Listen to me, son.' Weed tapped him on the knee with a huge finger. 'You're goin' to do a hell of a lot of things that you've never done. You're

goin' to get calluses on your hands, wear dirty clothes, swear like a man. Your private teacher will be old man Experience. He'll teach yuh things that ain't in books, and when yuh get a diploma from his school you'll be the first damn man that ever did. Most of us die in the first grade. You show up at the store at seven o'clock in the mornin', and Jerry will teach yuh how to harness a horse.'

Weed got up abruptly, hitched up his trousers and went striding back across the lawn to his own porch, whence he went clumping heavily into the house.

Rex stared after him a bit foolishly, got to his feet and went into the house. The air seemed heavy in there, and there was a faint scent of flowers. He remembered now that some one had sent a huge bouquet of flowers.

He sat down in an old rocker, staring moodily at the wall, where an old crocheted motto, slightly askew, stared back at him. Before he could read he had been taught that single line of cotton words, done in red against a brown background — 'Yield Not to Temptation.'

What temptation, he did not know. Possibly it meant any kind of temptation. Anyway, it had been held before his eyes since he could remember.

And there was another — 'Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother.' This one was in green on a tan

background, with a grapevine effect. His mother had never said much about this one. He knew the house did not belong to them. Sam Tilton rented it to them.

Finally he got up from the chair and went to an old desk, where his mother kept her papers. There was a letter, which came the day she died, still unopened. He looked at the postmark on it, which was slightly smudged, but was able to decipher 'Mesa City, Ariz.'

Slowly he tore it open and took out the single content — a folded green check on the Mesa City Bank, drawn in favor of Mrs. Peter Morgan, for the sum of seventy-five dollars. It was signed with an unintelligible scrawl, badly blotted.

He put the check back in the envelope. Some one was knocking at the front door, and that some one was Sam Tilton, short of stature, pudgy of waist, puffing heavily on the short butt of a cigar, almost enfolded between his thick lips.

'I was thinkin' about the rent,' he panted. 'Due las' week. Don't like to have it go too long. Sorry about your ma, young man.'

'How much was the rent?' asked Rex.

'Seventy-fi' dollars per quatter — due in advance.'

Rex drew out the check and handed it to him.

'Fuf-fine,' panted Tilton heavily, drawing out a

much-thumbed receipt-book. 'Goin' to stay on, eh? Uh-uh ——'

He squinted at the check, turned it over carefully.

'No good this way,' he said sadly. 'Ain't been endorsed. Your ma would have t' sign it before I could take it.'

'I'm afraid that is impossible, Mr. Tilton.'

'Seems t' me that way. Is that all you've got?'

'Every cent.'

'Well, well! Suppose I'll have to take p'session. Huh, huh! Well, you stay here to-night, and move out t'morrow. I lose money on it, but can't be helped. Did yore mother have a nice funeral? Queer woman. Don't suppose many folks went to see her off. Well, I'll be goin'.'

And the next morning Rex Morgan took his first job. Jerry, the big stable-man, showed him how to harness a horse. Jerry had barely gone past the primary grades in school, but he knew horses. Rex was afraid of being stepped on by the two big grays which he was supposed to drive, and he was as white as a sheet when he drove them through the narrow alley and out into the street in front of the grocery store.

He kept repeating under his breath: 'Pull left line to turn left; right line to turn right, and both lines to stop them.'

The horses knew where to go, and he had no difficulty in swinging them around to the front door. Amos Weed looked quizzically at him.

'Didn't expect yuh to handle 'em so soon,' he said. 'Was goin' to have Slim drive for yuh to-day. But I guess you'll do. C'mon in and load up. First delivery almost ready.'

Two clerks helped him load the wagon, explaining just where he should go in order to shorten the route. Rex listened to them in sort of daze, saying yes, when he hadn't the slightest idea of what it was all about.

Then he found himself back on the seat again. One of the men was explaining to him about the heavy iron weight, from which ran a strong strap, fastened to the bit of one of the horses.

'Always throw down that anchor when you stop,' explained the man. 'Those horses are high-headed. Don't depend on the brake. And don't forget to take it up when you start again.'

Rex nodded absently and tightened the lines. He drove away from the store and the horses broke into a trot. It was exhilarating to sit up there and guide a stepping team. As an experiment he leaned back, reached down to pick up an order sheet from one of the boxes, and almost tore a front wheel off against a fire-plug. A policeman swore roundly at him, as he trotted his team around a corner, barely

missing another vehicle, but Rex was trying to read the address on that slip of paper.

The horses were going faster now. He slipped the paper under his leg and shortened his grip on the lines. About a block ahead of him was a street car, just slowing to a stop.

Suddenly he heard the jangle of bells, the shrieking of a siren. It was behind him. Quickly he turned his head and looked back. It was the fire department, answering a call, heading down the street toward him.

For a moment he was paralyzed. He had been driving in the middle of the street, and now he forgot whether they were supposed to pass on the right or left-hand side of him. It seemed to him as though he was taking up all of the street, and that unless he did something real quick they would crash into him.

He reached back, picked up his whip, and slashed both horses, swinging heavily on the left line. With a lurch they broke into a running gallop, and the wheels of the wagon, skidding sideways on the car track, almost side-swiped the rear end of the street car.

Across a street intersection they went at a mad gallop, with the wagon doing a juggling act with the grocery orders. For two long blocks the way had been cleared for him, it seemed, but when half

way down the next block he saw a heavily loaded truck lurch out through an alley, blocking his way.

He forgot to set back on the lines, forgot to apply the brake. Perhaps it would have availed him little. But one thought flashed through his brain — the anchor. It was the last thing any driver would have thought about — but Rex Morgan was not a driver.

And as quickly as the thought struck him he leaned over, hooked his fingers in that iron anchor, and threw it off the right side of the wagon.

The twelve-pound weight hurtled through the air, whipped around a telephone pole, where it hung long enough to throw one of the horses almost a complete somersault, the wagon buckled sideways and upended on the sidewalk, while Rex Morgan described a parabola, landed on his hands and knees in the doorway of a clothing store, and ended up on his back, with his feet up the side of a counter.

And he stayed right there, trying to pump air into his lungs, while a white-faced clerk, quivering all over, leaned across the counter and looked down at Rex.

'What do you want?' he asked inanely.

'What have you got?' replied Rex. His right eye was fast swelling shut, and the knees of his trousers

were busted wide open, exposing badly bruised knees.

A crowd had gathered, and men were trying to untangle the two horses, which were miraculously unhurt. Even the wagon did not seem any the worse for it; but the grocery orders were a sad jumble. A policeman came in and looked at Rex. Finally he helped Rex to his feet, growling deep in his throat.

'Did — did the fuf-fire department catch me?' panted Rex.

'Were ye runnin' away from the department?'

'Yes.'

'They tur-rned a half-block fr-rom where ye started, ye poor fool. Who told ye ye could dr-rive?'

'I — I can drive all right — but I don't stop very well.'

'Oh, ye stopped all right. Wan of yer horses had his nose through a wheel of the big tr-ruck. If ye hadn't ——'

But at that moment Amos Weed came in. His face was red and he was panting heavily. He looked at Rex, worked his jaws savagely, and glared at the policeman.

'He ran a race wid the fire department, Mr. Weed,' said the officer. 'The boy is too swift to be dr-rivin' a delivery wagon.'

'He is!' exploded Weed angrily, turning on Rex.

'You are fired! Don't go near that wagon! You almost killed both horses. I was a fool to hire you, in the first place.'

Weed bustled outside into the crowd, while Rex leaned against a counter and tried to adjust his thoughts. He had never been hurt before, and the experience was quite a novelty. It was not remorse. He tried to grin.

'Get away from that counter!' snapped a voice. Rex turned his head slightly. The clerk was standing close to him, scowling and pointing.

'Move on, will you?' he demanded. 'You're bleeding on my counter. This is not a hospital. Will you move, or will ——'

The man reached over and put a hand on Rex's shoulder, as though to shove him away; and before Rex realized what he was doing he had clenched his fist and smashed the clerk square in the jaw, sending him spinning back against another counter.

Rex stared at the man, who made no move to resent the blow, but kept both hands up to his jaw. Like a man in a daze, Rex limped through the doorway, while the clerk ran out behind him, calling for the police. But the crowd had righted the wagon, untangled the team, and the policeman had gone on down his beat.

People looked curiously at the youth with the black eye, ripped trousers, which showed a bruised

knee, as he walked down the street. His right hand was sore from the blow he had struck the clerk, and he grinned foolishly at his own reflection in a plate-glass show window.

He had unconsciously started toward home, but now he realized that he had no home. In fact, he had walked out early that morning, without taking anything except the clothes he had on his back. He stopped on a corner near a big bank and watched the people going in and out of the institution.

Reaching inside his coat pocket he drew out the green check for seventy-five dollars. Without the proper identification it was worthless, but without hesitating he went into the bank and wrote his mother's signature across the back of the check.

The teller glanced at it closely, shot a quick glance at the bruised face of the young man, and shoved the check back to him.

'You better write your own name on it, too,' he said.

Fifteen minutes later Rex leaned against the ticket window at the Union Station.

'A ticket to Mesa City, Arizona,' he said.

After a few moments of investigation, the clerk replied.

'I can sell you one to Cañonville. Mesa City is on a stage line from there. When do you want to leave?'

'Right now.'

'Train leaves in thirty minutes. Gives you time to check your baggage.'

'Plenty,' agreed Rex. 'Were you ever in Mesa City?'

'No; and that's only half of it,' replied the clerk blandly. 'I prefer civilization.'

'Isn't Mesa City civilized?'

'Well, it's twenty-five miles from a railroad, in Arizona; so you may draw your own conclusions.'

CHAPTER II

THE FIGHTING NESTERS

About two thirds of the distance between Cañonville and Mesa City, traveling north toward Mesa City, the road keeps to the higher ground, several miles of it being along the rim of Coyote Cañon. From there it drops to the lower ground, nearly on a level with Black Horse River, and near the bottom of the grade it crosses Antelope Creek, which flows in from the northeast.

Just north of this crossing, on the right-hand side of the road, is an old weather-beaten sign, nailed to a gnarled cottonwood, and it reads:

THIS SIDE OF THE ROAD BELONGS TO THE 6 × 6
NESTERS KEEP OFF

That was Peter Morgan's warning to any one who might entertain any idea of taking up a piece of ground on that side of the road. For a great number of years Peter Morgan and his hard-riding cowboys had enforced that warning. It is true that some had ignored the sign; but they made haste to move on, when the 6 × 6 outfit proceeded to show them the error of their ways.

Peter Morgan did not own all that range, but he

surely did control it, until one day 'Spike' Cahill, one of the 6 × 6 punchers, rode in at the home ranch and announced that a nester family had moved in at the old ranch-house between Coyote Cañon and Antelope Creek.

'They've got a few head of stock, couple of wagons, and the gall of a sidewinder,' declared Spike.

'Did you tell 'em to keep movin'?' demanded Morgan hotly.

'I shore did!'

'What did they say?'

'The old man said f'r me to git to hell away from there, before he blowed me back a few ginerations. What in hell is a gineration, Pete?'

'Probably some kind of a damn gun,' said Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs, the cook of the 6 × 6, whose opinion usually settled all arguments, as far as Briggs was concerned.

At any rate, Peter Morgan went down to see this nester, whose name happened to be Paul Lane, and was promptly told that he fully intended staying just where he was, and that if any pestiferous cowpunchers started trouble with him, he'd make 'em wish they were on a dairy, where they belonged.

It rather amused Peter Morgan, in a way, whose word had almost been law in that part of the country — the law of might. He noticed that this nester had a son and a daughter. The girl was

possibly eighteen years of age, while the boy was a long, gangling youth, possibly twenty-five, with a devil-may-care air, which irritated Peter Morgan. The girl was tall and slender, and Peter Morgan thought she was rather pretty, although he knew more about cattle and horses and cards than he did of women.

But he was there for a purpose, and he told Paul Lane, in no uncertain terms, that he was an interloper, and that nesters were very unwelcome in any part of that range.

To which Paul Lane replied that he 'aimed t' stay just the same.' Yes, he had read that sign at Antelope Creek, and in his opinion the man who put it there had a lot of gall.

'There's a hell of a lot of land on this side of that road,' he told Morgan. 'Fact of the matter is, yuh could go plumb around the world on it, and I don't see how any one man has the gall to claim all of it.'

'Then you aim to try and stay here, eh?' queried Morgan.

'I aim to stay here,' corrected Lane. 'And yuh might pass the word around that I'm settled.'

'We don't pass our troubles along,' said Morgan. 'I'll give yuh three days to move on.'

'And then what?'

'Wait and see.'

Lane waited. He knew there was no use appeal-

ing to the law until something happened to injure him in some way; and he also knew that the nester would get little consideration in a Mesa City courtroom.

Peter Morgan's first move, a petty one, was to make a night raid on the nester's stable and silently remove all of his horses; herding them far back on the headwaters of Black Horse River, twenty miles away.

Two days later the horses were all back in Lane's corral, and Dell Bowen, foreman of the 6 × 6, found two of the 6 × 6 saddle-horses in the hills, sore-footed, sore-backed; attesting to the fact that Lane and his gangling son had used them to round up their stock.

And young Lane, who had gained the appellation of 'Long' Lane, told Spike Cahill confidentially that he and his father had fixed a trap-gun inside the stable door, which would blow hell out of anybody who opened it at night. He told this to Spike, just as though Spike had had nothing to do with the raid.

'I dunno if he was tryin' to be funny, or if he thought we didn't do it,' Spike told Peter Morgan, who exploded with wrath.

Morgan was a big man, his black hair slightly grizzled, piercing black eyes, like onyx beads, beneath heavy brows. His mouth was wide and thin-lipped; ready to laugh at anybody, except himself.

Morgan was known as a hard man to deal with, but his word was as good as his bond.

The 6 × 6 was the biggest outfit in the country, and besides that Morgan owned the Oasis saloon and gambling house in Mesa City, which paid him a fine revenue. Morgan had little to do with the management of the Oasis, which was handled by Jack Fairweather.

A mining boom north of Mesa City had been responsible for the growth of the place, but the mines had been nearly worked out at this time. Cañonville was the county seat, a town nearly the same size as Mesa City.

The 6 × 6 ranch was located about three miles northeast of Mesa City, on Antelope Creek. Northwest of town, some two miles away, was the Flying M outfit, owned by Dave Morgan, a cousin of Peter Morgan. Dave had tried to be as big a man in the community as Peter, but too much indulgence in the flowing bowl and at the green-covered table had left him a sour-faced cattleman, fighting to keep ahead of a mortgage.

They had little in common, these two Morgans. Peter rather frowned upon Dave's failures, and Dave sneered at Peter's successes; although they were always friendly enough, if only in a cold way.

Dave was younger than Peter, who was past fifty,

and they were not alike in any way, except coloring. Dave was slender, nervous, quick to take offense. He hired three cowboys — Ed Jones, Cal Dickenson, and 'Red' Eller.

Peter Morgan's outfit consisted of Dell Bowen, foreman, Bert Roddy, Spike Cahill, Ben Leach, and Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs. And they were a hard-bitted crew, even to Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs, who was so bow-legged he couldn't sit in an armchair.

Napoleon defended his position as ranch cook by saying:

'I riz from bein' a common puncher.'

It did not take Peter Morgan long to discover that Paul Lane and his family did not intend to move away. And there was a law against killing nesters, even on the Black Horse range; so Peter instructed his punchers to confine their operations to annoyance, instead of open warfare.

'You'll never annoy that feller enough to make him move,' declared Spike. 'Mebby we can make him so fightin' mad that he'll kill some of us, and then yuh can have him hung.'

'You watch him,' said Peter. 'Him and that fool son of his will likely maverick a few calves, and then we'll have him where the hair's short. There's a maverick law, yuh know, Spike.'

'What kind of a law?'

'Every *orejano* belongs to the Cattlemen's Association.'

'Shucks! And I aimed to go into that cow business myself some day.'

It might be explained that an *orejano* is an unbranded, weaned calf, which had always been legitimate prey for the first man who found it and put on his brand. In some parts of the country, especially farther north, they were known as 'mavericks,' but in the Southwest, where many of the Spanish words were used, they were generally spoken of as an *orejano.*

The unbranded, motherless calf has often been the nucleus of a big herd, and the practice had become so common that industrious cowboys, anxious to build a herd as quickly as possible, 'made' mavericks or *orejanos* by the simple process of separating a calf from its mother by force. This practice became so prevalent that it became necessary to pass laws governing the disposal of all motherless, unbranded calves. This was a law that had been recently passed, and few of the cowboys were aware that such a thing had been done.

Dave Morgan seemed greatly amused at Peter's failure to remove the Lane family, and his three punchers rubbed it in on the boys from the 6 × 6 on every occasion. Nan Lane came to Mesa City

once in a while, and the cowboys looked upon her with great favor, although none of them had met her.

They did not like her brother. He played a little poker and drank more than a little.

'Talks too much for a single-handed feller,' declared Red Eller. 'I wouldn't talk that much, even with all the Flyin' M behind me. But that sister of his is a dinger. I wish t' the Lord somebody would git a knock-down to her; so I could meet her. Some day I'm goin' to ride right up to that nester's shack and say howdy.'

'Howdy, Saint Peter,' said Ben Leach dryly.

'Hell, they can't shoot yuh for sayin' howdy.'

'You just think they can't, Red. Wait'll yuh lock horns with old man Lane. He done told me things about my family that I never heard before. He's what you'd call well-read.'

'Fortune-teller?' asked Red.

'Fortune, hell! Disaster, I'd call it. He told me that my grandpappy was a pole-cat. Fact.'

'Didja ever see yore grandpappy, Ben?'

'No-o-o, I never did.'

'Uh-huh. Well, yuh can't hardly dispute him, can yuh? How soon does Peter Morgan expect to make Lane move out?'

'You better go and ask Peter Morgan.'

Knowing that no one cared to discuss it with

Peter Morgan, it was a good way to dismiss the argument.

Lem Sheeley, the sheriff, and Noah Evans, his deputy, riding through Mesa City, heard about the nester on the 6 × 6, and decided to investigate.

'The nester part of it don't interest me none, Noah,' explained Lem. 'But I'd kinda like to see what this here Lane looks like while he's alive.'

Lem was almost too fat to be riding a horse. His face, surmounted by an unruly mop of corn-colored hair, was like a full moon. He was only thirty years of age; a native of the Black Horse country. Noah was tall, thin, with a hook-nose and watery eyes, which gave him the appearance of having a perpetual cold in his head. He wore shirts which were too small for him, and trousers that were too large. As Lem said, 'Noah busts the elbows out of his shirts from grabbin' at his pants.'

They rode in at the nester ranch, rather curious to see the man who defied the 6 × 6. It was not much of a ranch-house, being an old tumble-down affair on the edge of a swale which led down to Coyote Cañon. The fences were badly in need of repair, and the old sway-backed stable threatened at any time to collapse in the middle.

Years previous to this time some one had built the old place, ranged stock for a time, but finally gave it up. It had never been filed on as a home-

stead. PeterMorgan had often threatened to tear it down, burn it down, or otherwise destroy it, but had neglected to do so.

'We better be a little careful,' advised Noah. 'You never stop to think you're so damn fat that the worst shot in the world could hit yuh at four hundred yards with a twenty-two.'

'Then you'd git my job,' chuckled Lem, as they rode up to the ranch-house.

'Don't want it. Look at you. You've been sheriff only three years, and you weighed a hundred and fifty when yuh took office. Me and my indigestion would look like hell packin' a hundred and thirty-five, wouldn't ——'

Noah stopped talking and looked intently at Nan Lane, who came out on the rickety front porch. She was wearing a pale blue dress and a white apron. She was quite the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and he was especially partial to pale blue. Lem folded his hands over the horn of his saddle and helped Noah look at her.

She brushed a hand across her forehead and smiled at them.

'How do you do?' she said pleasantly.

'Nester, hell!' snorted Noah under his breath.

'Purty good,' grinned Lem foolishly. 'Yore pa at home, Miss?'

Nan was looking at him closely now. She had

seen the flash of his badge in the sunlight, and her demeanor changed perceptibly.

'Why did you want him?' she asked coldly.

'I'm the sheriff, and I ——'

'So I noticed.'

'He shore wears it in sight, ma'am,' said Noah quickly. 'He got the biggest star they make. Hates t' go out at night, 'cause it don't show in the dark. I been tellin' ——'

'Shut up!' snorted Lem disgustedly.

'Did Peter Morgan send you over here?' asked Nan.

'He did not, ma'am. We heard about yuh; so me and Noah thought we'd kinda ride over and have a look at yuh.'

'Go ahead and look,' she said indifferently.

Noah turned his head and looked at Lem disgustedly.

'Ma'am,' he said to Nan solemnly, 'you've heard of the hoof-and-mouth disease, haven't yuh? Well, that's what he's got. Every time he opens his mouth he gets his foot in it.'

Lem grinned vacantly. 'Nemmind him, ma'am,' he said. 'He has indigestion somethin' awful. Nothin' is funny to him. Eats sody by the pound. That's why he rides around with his mouth open all the time. If he ever keeps his mouth shut for five minutes at a stretch, he'll jist natcherally bust.'

'I'd rather have indigestion than fatty degineration,' declared Noah hotly.

Lem flopped his arms dismally. 'I s'pose. Anyway, I don't think this lady is a bit interested in our symptoms.'

'Not a great deal,' choked Nan. 'Did you want to see my father?'

'I was thinkin' about it,' said Lem solemnly. 'But yore temperature went so danged low that I froze my ears, and now I dunno jist why I wanted to see him.'

'He didn't,' declared Noah. 'Somebody told him there was a mighty pretty girl over here. Lem would ride miles to investigate a rumor like that. Why, I've knowed him to ride a sore-footed horse plumb over to Gila County, and when ——'

'Whoa!' snorted Lem. 'That'll be about all, Noah. Jist kinda calm down until yore vocal cords stop vibratin', and you'll feel all right again. You excuse him, ma'am. He's one of them queer folks who dream things and tells 'em for pers'nal recollections.'

Noah subsided, grinning widely, while Nan leaned against a porch-post and wiped the tears from her eyes. It was the first time she had felt like screaming with laughter since they had moved into the Black Horse range.

A man was riding in from toward Mesa City, and

they watched him approach. From the way he swayed in his saddle there was little doubt of his being either drunk or sick. He rode up to the stable, dismounted heavily, and removed his saddle, turning the horse into a corral.

It was Walter Lane, Nan's brother, whose long, gangling frame had caused him to be known locally as 'Long.' He came up to the sheriff, and they noticed that his face was bruised and swollen, one eye having assumed a purplish cast. There was dried blood on his chin, on the front of his shirt, one sleeve of which had been almost torn off at the shoulder.

He eyed the sheriff owlishly.

'Whazzamatter 'round here?' he demanded.

'Not a darn thing,' grinned Lem.

'Yea-a-ah?' He looked at Nan inquiringly. 'Nothin's matter, eh?'

He rocked on his heels, trying to roll a cigarette.

'You ought to go and clean up,' said Nan wearily.

'Thasso? Huh! Shay!' He grinned crookedly at the sheriff. 'I'll betcha there's one of that damn 6 × 6 outfit that won't nav'gate f'r a while. Whooee! I shore fixed him.'

'Walter, you haven't been fighting, have you?' asked Nan anxiously.

'Have I?' He winked at Lem drunkenly. 'Lemme tell yuh somethin'. Lemme tell yuh ——'

He shifted his feet and frowned at the sheriff.

'What do you want here?' he demanded.

'We just dropped in,' smiled Lem.

'Is thasso? Well, as far as I'm concerned, yuh can jist drop out ag'in. You're a friend of Pete Morgan, ain't yuh? Oh, yeah, yuh are. He swings all the votes in this end of the county, and if you wasn't his friend, you wouldn't be sheriff. And no friend of ——'

'Walter, will you stop that?' demanded Nan nervously. 'These gentlemen merely stopped ——'

'Don't let 'em fool yuh, kid,' sneered the young man.

'Hang onto yourself,' advised Noah coldly. You're too drunk to *sabe* what you're sayin'. We're not interested in yore troubles with Peter Morgan, unless it comes down to reg'lar trouble.'

'And then what chance has a nester?'

'Depends on what the nester has done,' said Lem.

'If he protected his own?' suggested the boy.

'Lotsa ways of lookin' at it,' sighed Lem. He was more interested in talking with Nan than arguing with her drunken brother.

'There's just one way you'd look at it,' said the boy. He spat dryly and had to move quickly to keep his balance.

'You better wash yore face and go to bed,' advised Lem.

'A-a-aw right.'

He hitched up his belt and went up the steps past Nan, but stopped at the doorway and looked back.

'Any old time they monkey with me, they git what's comin' to 'em,' he said warningly, and went into the house.

Nan shook her head wearily and looked at Lem.

'He *will* drink,' she said sadly.

'Shore,' nodded Lem.

'And he's just the finest kind of a boy when he is sober.'

'Shore,' agreed Lem. 'Hadn't ort to drink.'

'Here comes somebody,' said Noah, twisting around in his saddle.

Four men were riding toward them, traveling rather slowly, and as they drew nearer the sheriff recognized Peter Morgan, Spike Cahill, of the 6 × 6, Ed Jones, of the Flying M, and Joe Cave, one of the stage drivers.

They seemed to recognize the sheriff and deputy and increased their speed.

'What in hell has gone wrong now?' growled Noah.

Joe Cave swung away from the rest and stopped his horse near the corral, while the other three men came up to the porch.

'Hyah, Mr. Morgan,' said Lem.

'Hello, Lem.'

Peter Morgan looked closely at the sheriff and at Nan Lane. From the expression of their faces, these men came on no friendly mission.

'Where's Long Lane?' asked Morgan. 'You know who I mean,' he said, when no one answered him. 'He's here. That's his horse in the corral.'

'What do you want him for, Peter Morgan?' asked Nan anxiously.

Morgan merely glanced sharply at her, but directed his answer to Lem Sheeley.

'Young Lane killed Ben Leach less than half an hour ago, sheriff. If yore judgment is good, you'll ride back the way yuh came — and forget what I told yuh.'

Nan was standing on the top step, leaning forward, her eyes wide, as she listened to what Morgan said. But now she turned and ran to the doorway.

'Stop that damn girl!' snapped Peter Morgan. 'Get to the back of the house, Spike!'

Spike Cahill spurred around to the back door, while Peter Morgan dismounted, drawing his gun. But before he could reach the steps, Lem Sheeley had dismounted and stopped him.

'Just a minute, Morgan,' said Lem coldly. 'This is my job — not yours. And I'm not takin' yore

advice. If that drunken kid killed Ben Leach, it's my job to take care of him.'

Morgan stepped back, scowling at the sheriff.

'Well, go ahead and do it; we'll argue later.'

Lem walked up the steps. Nan was still standing at the doorway.

'Oh, he didn't do it,' she whispered. 'Don't you see, they are trying to ruin us. It's part of their game, Mr. Sheeley.'

Lem stopped and looked her straight in the eyes. It was probably the first time he had ever looked any woman straight in the eyes, and for a moment he forgot that inside the house was a murderer.

'Do yuh think so?' he asked softly.

'I — I think so. They didn't want you to interfere.'

'Mm-m-m-m,' Lem moved past her and in to the living-room. She did not leave the door, but watched Peter Morgan, standing at the bottom of the steps. Noah Evans still sat on his horse.

Slowly Lem moved through the living-room and into the kitchen. Through the window he could see Spike Cahill on his horse, gun in hand. Farther to the left and down by the corral sat Joe Cave.

But there was no sign of Long Lane. Lem moved slowly back to the living-room. There was another door, which led to a bedroom. It was not locked. Slowly Lem opened it and stepped inside. It was a

small room, poorly furnished. On the floor was an empty box, which had contained rifle cartridges, and near the open window was a loaded thirty-thirty cartridge, evidently dropped by some one who was in a hurry.

There had been no one guarding that side of the house, and within fifty feet from the window was a thick fringe of brush which led to a deep arroyo. Lem peered out through the window, but could see no one. He lowered the window softly. There was an old nail, hanging on a string which had been used to block the lower half of the window. He inserted the nail in the little hole over the top of the sash, and went slowly back to the living-room, kicking the empty cartridge box under the bed and putting the loaded cartridge in his pocket.

There was a bed in the living-room, which he judged to be the one used by Paul Lane and his son, and the room he had just left was the one used by Nan. She was still standing at the doorway, and she looked curiously at Lem. Morgan came up to the doorway, halting just outside.

'Is there any more rooms beside this room, the kitchen, and that bedroom?' asked Lem.

Nan shook her head. Lem turned to Morgan.

'He must have went straight through here, Morgan,' he said. 'I can't find anybody.'

'That's damn funny!' snorted Morgan. He

surged into the house and went through to the kitchen, where he flung the back door open.

'See anybody, Spike?' he asked.

'Not a soul.'

Spike dismounted and came inside. It did not take them long to satisfy themselves that Long Lane was not in the house.

'We forgot about the winders on this side of the house,' said Spike. 'He could 'a' gone out that one, Morgan.'

'And fastened it behind himself,' sneered Morgan. 'Guess ag'in. No, he made you folks think he was goin' to stop, but kept on goin'. Probably went through the house, circled around to the stable and saddled a fresh horse. But we'll get him if he stays in this country.'

'Of course, I'm only the sheriff,' said Lem slowly, 'but I'd shore like to find out what this killin' was about.'

'It started in Mesa City,' said Morgan. 'Young Lane had been drinkin', and they met in the Oasis. Mebby Ben had a few drinks. I dunno exactly what it was about, Lem: but the boys said Ben called Lane a nester. One word led to another and they started a fight. I reckon it was a good fight, until Ben kinda got the best of it, and then Lane hit him with a chair.'

'He knocked Ben down with it,' declared Spike.

'And before we could stop him he started to put the boots to Ben. But he didn't hurt Ben much, before we stopped him, and then Lane started for home. Ben woke up and — and ——'

'And took out after Lane, eh?' queried the sheriff.

'Yeah. Ben was crazy mad. He fought fair, Ben did.'

'And Lane killed him, eh?'

'We took out after Ben right away,' said Spike. 'If it was goin' to mean another fight, we intended to see that it was a fair one. We found Ben about a mile and a half from town, layin' beside the road, with a bullet through his head. He's there yet.'

'Lane bushwhacked him,' declared Morgan hotly.

'A-a-a-aw, hell!' said Noah Evans disgustedly. 'And yuh call that murder! Ben Leach got what he was a-lookin' for.'

'He got bushwhacked by a damn nester!' snapped Spike.

'And all this time he gettin' farther and farther away,' complained Joe Cave.

'The question is this,' said the sheriff thoughtfully. 'Did Ben Leach do any shootin'?'

He remembered what Lane had said about fixing one of the 6 × 6 so he wouldn't navigate for a while.

'I don't know about that,' said Morgan. 'We didn't stop to investigate.'

'Hang 'em first, and investigate afterwards, eh?' said Noah.

Morgan scowled at Noah, but said nothing. There would be an election next year, and Morgan controlled a lot of votes.

'What do yuh intend doin'?' asked Morgan. 'All this talk don't do any good. Are you goin' after that killer or do we have to do it ourselves?'

'Go where?' asked Lem coldly. 'Run the legs off our horses, before we know which way to go? I reckon we'll go back and take a squint at the dead man.'

He turned and held out his hand to Nan.

'I'm pleased to meet yuh, ma'am,' he said pleasantly.

Morgan growled under his breath and walked outside, followed by the rest of the men. Nan shook hands with Lem.

'I — I heard you put down that window,' she whispered softly, her voice filled with gratitude.

'I hate a draught,' he whispered seriously. 'I catch cold awful danged easy. So-long.'

The crowd of men mounted and rode back along the dusty highway. Morgan and his men had nothing to say on the way back to the spot where they found Leach's body. It was lying beside the

road, and the sheriff needed little examination to find that he had been shot through the head.

'You moved him, didn't yuh?' he asked Morgan.

'Took him off the road,' surlily. 'He was layin' on his face.'

'Where's his gun?'

The holster was empty and there was no gun in sight.

'Where's his horse?' wondered Spike Cahill. 'I didn't see it when we came past here.'

None of them had. The road was rocky along there, and on the right-hand side was a scattering of broken rock which had been removed from the road at the time of construction.

'Looks to me as though Lane took his gun and horse,' said Morgan. 'Probably cached the horse for a getaway.'

'Well, there's one sure thing,' said Lem sadly. 'Ben Leach is too damn dead to tell us about what happened; so we might as well put him on a horse and take him to town.'

'And there's another sure thing,' declared Morgan. 'If the law won't hang Lane for his murder — somebody will.'

'If there's goin' to be any hangin' done in this county, it better be done by the law,' replied Lem meaningly.

CHAPTER III

THE DEADLINE

'We can't do a thing for you, Dave. You ought to know we're carrying you for every cent your ranch is worth to us. This is not a personal matter. I know you're good for it; but I merely represent the directors, and the stockholders of this bank.'

John Harper, president of the Mesa City Bank, leaned back in his swivel-chair, and looked at Dave Morgan, who was seated across the table from him. Harper was a small, wiry, grizzled man, smooth-shaven, neatly dressed. He had been with the Mesa City Bank since the day it opened.

Dave Morgan twisted his lips seriously. He needed a shave, and, judging from his bloodshot eyes, he needed sleep.

'All right,' he said slowly. 'I reckon I could get along, John. I just wanted to see about a loan. How about buyin' the Flyin' M?'

Harper shook his head quickly.

'No, Dave. Say, why don't you get Peter to take a second mortgage? He's pretty well fixed.'

Dave smiled crookedly, shaking his head. 'Not Pete. If I was anybody, except his cousin. He thinks I've got damn poor judgment in business.'

'You haven't done so well, Dave.'

'Oh, that's all right; I'm not kickin'. I get more fun out of my money than Pete does. He's been goin' around like a bear with a sore head ever since them nesters moved in on him. They've got him bluffed.'

'The nester's son had a fight over at the Oasis today,' said the banker. 'I happened to be out in front about the time it was over. I don't know who got whipped, but I saw young Lane get on his horse and ride out of town. In a few moments Ben Leach followed him, I think. Several of the boys stood around the hitch-rack for a few minutes, and then they all rode away.'

'Wasn't a gun-fight, was it?'

'No, there wasn't any shooting.'

'Young Lane is a tough *hombre*,' laughed Dave. 'Some of Pete's punchers probably rubbed him the wrong way. I guess the old man is kinda salty, too. Well, I've got to be movin'.'

'I'm sorry about that loan, Dave; but business is business.'

'That's all right, John. I'm pretty near busted, but I'll pull through.'

He laughed bitterly and hitched up his belt.

'Mebby somebody will die and leave me a fortune.'

'Have you any rich relatives?'

'Only Pete — and he's healthy.'

Dave laughed and walked out of the bank. But there was little mirth in his laugh. He stopped in at the post-office to get the ranch mail, and the clerk handed him a telegram, along with the rest of his mail.

'I'm not sure about that telegram,' he said. 'It is either D. Morgan or P. Morgan, and I can't tell which.'

Dave tore it open and glanced quickly at the telegram.

'It's mine,' he said shortly, and walked out, stuffing the mail in his pocket. The telegram read:

MRS MORGAN PASSED AWAY SUDDENLY AND WAS BURIED LAST SUNDAY STOP TRACED SON TO DEPOT WHERE HE PURCHASED TICKET TO CAÑONVILLE.

J. E. BLAIR

Dave Morgan halted at the edge of the wooden sidewalk, a puzzled expression on his face.

'Mrs. Morgan!' he exclaimed to himself. 'So old Pete had a wife and a son, eh?'

He started to laugh, but checked it quickly. When had Pete married, he wondered. He had been on the same range with Peter for over twenty years. Of course, Peter had taken trips East with cattle, and it had been said that Peter was a wild

devil in those days, but no one had ever mentioned the fact that Peter had been married.

Probably got drunk, married in that condition, and had been forced to support the woman away from Mesa City. And there was a son, too; a son who would inherit the 6 × 6 and the Oasis. And Dave had thought he was the only living relative of Peter Morgan.

Dave had been married. It had been so long ago that he could hardly remember what the woman looked like. But their nuptial bliss didn't last long. Dave was too wild. He remembered that Peter had remonstrated with him, tried to get him to straighten up, but it was no use. Anyway, it was none of Pete's business, he had decided. And one morning, when he awoke from a drunken spree, the woman was gone.

He wondered what had caused Pete and his wife to separate. As he stood there, thinking over the situation, Peter Morgan rode into town with his three men, the sheriff and deputy, and the body of Ben Leach.

Their arrival caused plenty of excitement in Mesa City. A crowd gathered quickly around the livery-stable, where Lem Sheeley had hired a vehicle in which to take the body to the coroner at Cañonville. Indignation ran high when the crowd heard that Leach had been killed by Long

Lane, and a number volunteered to form a posse.

But Lem Sheeley, the sheriff, was deaf to their offers.

'Keep yore hands off,' he requested them. 'This job belongs to the law — not to a lot of damn fools with a rope.'

'Then you better do somethin' right quick,' said Peter Morgan. 'Either you do yore duty, Lem, or ——'

'Or what?'

'You'll see.'

Shortly after the sheriff and deputy drove away with the body of Ben Leach, old Paul Lane rode in to Mesa City. He had been to Cañonville, but had stopped at home on his way back, where he heard what had happened. Now he wanted more information than Nan was able to give him.

He met Peter Morgan in front of the bank. Dave Morgan and Joe Cave, the stage driver, were there. For several moments the big cattleman and the nester eyed each other closely. Then ——

'That's what yuh get for stayin' where yuh ain't wanted,' said Peter coldly.

'Yea-a-ah?' Lane gritted his word through clenched teeth.

'That's what I said, Lane. You better move quick.'

'I'm not movin', Morgan. To-day I filed a homestead.'

'Yuh did, eh? I suppose you know yore son is a murderer.'

'I don't know any such a damn thing! If he killed Ben Leach, it was in self-defense.'

'Men who kill in self-defense don't usually run away.'

'When everybody's ag'in' 'em, they do.'

'You're crazy.'

Morgan turned his back and started away, but stopped and came back to Lane.

'We're through fooling with you, Lane,' he said. 'We'll find your son and make an example of him. and it won't take us long to do it either. And if you're wise, you'll pull out of this country as fast as you can.'

'If you're through, I'd like to say a few words, Morgan,' said the old man coldly. 'That ranch belongs to me now. The line runs about two hundred yards this side of the ranch-house. And when you or yore men ride my way, yuh better estimate distance pretty close.'

'Drawin' a deadline, eh?'

'Agin' the 6 × 6. And another thing, Morgan; yesterday I found an *orejano*, with my brand on it. I brand on the left hip, but this calf was branded on the right hip. I suppose yore punchers, or you, for-

got where I branded. They tell me you got yore start by pickin' up *orejanos*, Morgan; so I just heated an iron and run the 6 × 6 on its left shoulder, passin' it back to you.'

For a moment Morgan glared at the old man, who was little more than half his size, and then lashed out with his right fist, catching Lane just above the left eye and knocking him flat. But the old man was not knocked out; the blow had landed too high for that. For a moment the old man sprawled on his side, dazed, hurt. Then his hand jerked back to his holster.

But Joe Cave stepped in front of him, blocking him from using the gun. Morgan laughed shortly, turned his back, and strode over to the Oasis saloon, while Joe Cave helped Lane to his feet.

'That shore was a dirty punch,' said Joe.

The old man brushed off his clothes, turned and went back to his horse, while Dave Morgan and Joe looked at each other and laughed.

'I'd hate to be in Pete's boots,' grinned Joe. 'That old jigger will kill him if he don't look out.'

'That's no lie, Joe. Let's go and have a drink, eh? No, not to the Oasis.'

Joe had worked for Dave before driving stage, and they knew each other's business fairly well. Joe was a colorless sort of person, with tow-colored hair and buck-teeth. He had been fired from the

6 × 6 for playing a crooked game of poker in the bunk-house, and naturally had no love for Peter Morgan.

'Mebby I was a fool for blockin' the old man,' said Joe Cave.

'Mebby Pete will give yuh a reward for savin' his life,' grinned Dave. 'He ought to pay yuh for that, Joe.'

'Any time!' snorted Joe. 'He wouldn't pay a nickel for a front seat at the Battle of Waterloo, with the original folks doin' the fightin'.'

'Why, I thought you loved old Pete.'

'That overbearin' old badger? What are yuh drinkin'?'

CHAPTER IV

SORROWING COWBOYS

PETER MORGAN and Dell Bowen rode back to the 6 × 6, but Spike Cahill and Bert Roddy stayed in town. Bert was a roly-poly sort of a cowboy, too fat to walk and almost too fat to ride. He had bunked with Ben Leach, and after a few drinks he became tearful.

In fact, the evening was still young when Bert became almost maudlin in his grief. He and Ben had quarreled for over a year, and at times they had almost come to blows; but just now Ben had been his best friend, a model young man, a paragon of all the virtues.

'My, my, he wash shome feller,' declared Bert owlishly. 'Do I mish him? I tell yuh, Spike, it wash jist like tearin' out my own heart to lose ol' Bennie. There never wash and never will be another like ol' Bennie.'

'Lishen,' said Spike thickly. 'You shut up. Nex' thing you know I'll be cryin' with yuh. I don' wanna cry. Have 'nother drink. Bertie. Na-a-a-a-aw! Not another cry! You damn fool, don'tcha unnerstand English?'

'I — I feel my losh,' wailed Bert. 'Don'tcha know I feel my losh?'

'He feels his losh,' explained Spike to the bartender.

'He feels his liquor, yuh mean,' said the calloused dispenser of drinks.

'A great shorrow has come upon me,' explained Bert. 'You heard 'bout Bennie Leach, didn't yuh, bartend'r? Ter'ble! The bes' man in thish state died t'day, and I mourn him. Hish losh is more than I can bear.'

And Bert Roddy proceeded to cry openly and unafraid. Spike looked at him disgustedly, kicked him a few times, which seemed ineffectual, and then proceeded to have a little cry on his own hook.

'Go home,' advised the bartender.

'Home won't never be home without Bennie,' wailed Bert.

'We ought to do shomethin',' said Spike tearfully. 'That sheriff won't do nothin'.'

'Tha's a good idea,' agreed Bert. 'Le's take the law in our own hands, Schpike. We owe it to poor ol' Bennie.'

'You fellers better rattle yore hocks home, before somebody finds yuh loose,' advised the bartender.

'That is alsho good advice,' agreed Bert. He dug in his pocket and took out some money. 'Gimme a quart, bartender. I'd rather drink alone out of a bottle than to make merry with a crowd at yore

bar. Yore face would shour milk. Keep the change.'

'Hey! You're two-bits shy, feller.'

'Hold yore b-b-breath till yuh get it, will yuh?'

They stumbled outside, Bert carrying the quart of liquor, and went to their horses.

'The ques'n is,' propounded Spike, 'what'll we do?'

'Sh-shall we flip a coin?' asked Bert.

'Tha's fine. Heads we do — tails we don't.'

Spike produced a piece of money and threw it in the air. It being quite dark, they had no idea where it fell; so they lighted matches and crawled around in the dust on their hands and knees, until Spike happened to find it.

'It's heads,' declared Spike, gathering in the money.

'We do,' said Bert solemnly.

'It's all shettled,' agreed Spike. 'We do, and tha's all there is to it.'

After several moments they were able to regain their feet.

'We do,' declared Bert thickly. 'Now the ques'n is — what do we do?'

'Ex-actly. What do we do, Bertie?'

'I dunno. Go home? No, that wasn't it. Le's have 'nother drink.'

They drank from the bottle.

''F poor old Bennie was only here,' sighed Spike. 'He loved to drink from a bottle.'

'Tha's it!' exclaimed Bert. 'Tha's what we came for. Don'tcha 'member, Spike? We was goin' to do shomethin'.'

'Yessir,' choked Spike. 'Le's go out and shee if we can't find that murderin' nester. We'll lock 'm up.'

'Tha's the idea. Wait'll I button my vest around thish danged bottle. We'll show 'm shomethin', ol' par'ner.'

They managed to get on their horses and headed away in the darkness. Both horses wanted to run, and both riders were willing to let them. They were too drunk to realize their danger in going to the nester's place at night.

There were no lights in the old ranch-house. They fell off their horses at the corral fence, had another drink and tried to formulate a plan of battle. It was very dark out there. Somewhere in the hills a coyote yipped lonesomely.

'Wha's the idea now?' asked Bert drunkenly.

'Tha's question.'

Spike Cahill was not feeling just like a fighting man now. He rather wanted to sleep.

'Let's turn their horshes loose firs',' suggested Bert. 'Set 'm on foot, eh?'

They went staggering along the corral fence to the old stable, where they had another drink.

'You stand guard at the door,' instructed Spike.

'I'll guard it, y'betcha,' agreed Bert. 'I'm bes' li'l guard yuh ever sheen.'

The big stable door was unlocked. There was quite a wind blowing, and it was not very warm. Both cowboys were carrying their guns in their hands. Spike opened the big door, swinging it back against the wall, and went inside, while Bert stood just inside the stable, with a cocked gun in his hand, trying to tune his ears to all sounds.

Even in the darkness it did not take Spike long to discover that the stable was empty. He bumped his nose against the side of a stall, and swore drunkenly. And one of his pawing hands came in contact with a set of harness, which obligingly fell off a peg and draped around him.

'Wha's goin' on in there?' demanded Bert in a sepulchral whisper. 'Speak, or I'll sh-shoot.'

'Shoot if you mus',' wailed Spike. 'I'm helpl's. Got a breechin' 'round my neck and a hame in one of my boots.'

He managed to get loose from the harness, and one of his groping hands came in contact with the short ladder which led up to the old loft. Just why he should go up there never occurred to him, but he did.

He tried to straighten up and his head came in contact with the low, sloping roof so hard that he

fell on his hands and knees. Just ahead of him was the square opening in the end of the stable, used as a hay-window.

Spike was blinking at the window, when he heard a dull thud, a frightened curse, the sound of a revolver shot. There was only one explanation to Spike. The nesters had discovered Bert Roddy.

'Well, they'll have their hands full,' he declared to himself, and walked out through the hay-window.

It was about twelve feet to the ground and he landed all in a heap. The liquor had made him almost shock-proof, but he realized that a man had jumped on him and was kicking and striking with sickening regularity.

Spike Cahill loved to fight. He had lost his gun, but that was merely incidental. He managed to shake off his assailant long enough to get to his feet, and then they went at it, hammer and tongs.

Down they went again, rolling over and over, kicking, striking and gouging, missing oftener than they landed, unable to see each other. A man was running from the ranch-house, carrying a lantern; but Spike paid no attention to him, until the lantern illuminated both him and his antagonist. Then he looked up at old man Lane, half-dressed, a cocked revolver in his right hand. To Spike it was very like a nightmare. He realized that his opponent had ceased fighting, and he looked down at the

bruised face of Bert Roddy, whose eyes were blinking in the lantern light.

'What seems to be goin' on here?' demanded the old man.

'Thish?' queried Spike. 'Oh, thish? Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yeah, this!' snapped the old man. 'What are you two doin' here in my yard? Ain't there room at the 6 × 6 for yuh to fight, without comin' over here, shootin' and fightin', wakin' everybody up?'

Slowly Spike got up from Bert, who managed to get to his feet. They were both badly bruised.

'Misser Lane,' said Spike foolishly, 'thish is so unexpected. B'lieve me, I dunno what to shay. I'd crave to have yuh put away that gun. We ain't doin' nothin', and we ain't goin' to do nothin'.'

'You're danged right yuh ain't. Now, you fellers get on yore horses and head for home. I ought to fill yuh both with lead, I suppose. What in hell were yuh doin' here, anyway?'

'Tha's a question,' said Spike seriously. 'B'lieve me, whatever it was — we're all through.'

'Ain't it a fac'?' agreed Bert. 'I sholemnly swear that the test'mony I give in this case ——'

'Go home,' said the old man. 'You're both too drunk to do anything. And don't never come here again.'

'We won't,' promised Spike.

He followed them to their horses and watched

them ride away in the darkness, wondering why they had been fighting and especially why they were fighting in his door-yard.

'What I'd crave t' know is thish,' said Bert dismally, as they rode toward Mesa City. 'What was it all about, and where in hell did you come from? You was inside the stable, wasn't yuh?'

'I shore was, Bertram. What I want to know, is what happened to you down there. Didn't yuh shoot?'

'Oh, abstively. I — say, I've lost my gun!'

'Same here,' sadly. 'What did yuh shoot at?'

'I dunno. I thought somebody slammed the door shut on me. Anyway, I got knocked down and my gun went off. I got up as quick as I could and shoved the door open, when somebody comes bouncin' almost into me; so I jist cuts loose and fights f'r m' life.'

'That was me,' dismally. 'I fell out of the hay-loft.'

'Mebby it was the wind.'

'What was the wind?'

'Slammed the door ag'in' me.'

'Mebby. Where's the bottle?'

'Some'ers; I ain't got it. We can git more in Mesa.'

'Aw, I wasn't thirsty — I wanted to bust it over a rock.'

'Gittin' temperance, cowboy?'

'Gittin' wise. Man hadn't ought to drink.'

'Well, I won't bear down so hard, Spike. I will say that a man hadn't ort to do anythin' else, when he's drinkin'.'

CHAPTER V

REX GETS A RIDE

And that same morning Rex Morgan arrived at Cañonville. His right eye was still discolored and there were bruises on his face, but he had purchased a pair of trousers, and still had five dollars left.

Cañonville rather amazed him: the architecture, the dusty street, all horse-drawn vehicles, wide-hatted men. Rex knew nothing of the cattle country. The stage office sign caught his eye, and he remembered that he must ride by stage to Mesa City. He had made up his mind to find the man who had sent that seventy-five-dollar check.

'Shore, yuh can ride to Mesa City,' said the nondescript 'Bunty' Smith, who, with the able assistance of Joe Cave, piloted the stage between Cañonville and Mesa City. Bunty was a small, grizzled individual, whose face was unusually lop-sided from an immense chew of tobacco.

He spat violently and considered Rex closely.

'Horned-frawgs!' he exclaimed. 'I can jist look at yuh and bet a hundred-t'-one that you ain't no native of this here country, young man. Goin' t' Mesa City, eh? Drummer?'

'Drummer?'

'Uh-huh; sellin' things.'

'I haven't anything to sell,' smiled Rex. 'No, I am merely going to Mesa City out of curiosity.'

'Horned-frawgs! Curiosity? Mm-m-m-m-m, well.' He spat again and scratched his stubbled jaw. 'It ain't none of my business. Fare's two dollars.'

Rex dug deep in his pocket and drew out five dollars in change, from which he separated two dollars. Bunty watched him curiously.

As Rex pocketed the remaining three dollars, Bunty rubbed his chin again and considered Rex gravely.

'It ain't none of my business,' he said slowly, 'but have you got any money?'

'I've still got three dollars,' said Rex.

'Huh!' Bunty shoved back his battered sombrero and ran his fingers through his sparse hair. 'Three dollars, eh? And you're goin' to Mesa City out of curiosity! Horned-frawgs! You put that two dollars in yore pocket. I'm drivin' this here stage to Mesa City after dinner, and I need a shotgun messenger kinda bad. You can earn yore ride.'

'Shotgun messenger?' queried Rex. 'I don't understand.'

'Guard,' said Bunty, a twinkle in his eye. 'You set on the seat with me and hold the sawed-off shot-

gun; sabe? If anybody tries to hold us up, you shoot hell out of 'em.'

'Oh!' said Rex dumbly. 'But I — I never have shot a man.'

'I ain't never been held up, either. You be here about one o'clock, young feller. What didja say yore name is?'

'My name is Morgan — Rex Morgan.'

'Yea-a-a-ah? Watcha know about that? Mine's Smith. Yuh spell it S-m-i-t-h. Pronounced jist like she's spelled. Folks calls me Bunty. You be here at one o'clock, Morgan.'

Bunty spat violently and headed for the back room of the office, while Rex went back to the street. Bunty Smith rather amazed him. The idea of any one not being able to spell Smith — or to pronounce it. Still, Rex rather liked Bunty Smith.

He spent the rest of the morning on the main street. The chap-clad gentry of Cañonville paid no attention to him. It was just at noon when Lem Sheeley and Noah Evans came to Cañonville with the body of Ben Leach, and Rex was in the crowd which gathered around the front of the sheriff's office, curious to know who the dead man was and how he had met his death.

'Got in a fight and got killed,' said the laconic Noah, as they waited for the coroner.

Lem was a little more explicit, and Rex learned

that the man had been shot, either during or after a fight, and that he had been a resident of Mesa City. He listened to what the sheriff had to say about it, and went to the stage office to tell Bunty Smith.

'I knowed him well,' said Bunty. 'Plenty much of a damn fool, too. Think a nester killed him, eh? Must 'a' been one of the Lane fambly. Well, I'll be darned! Ben Leach. Still, I reckon the day must come when somebody pokes a pin through our balloon. Sooner or later, we'll all git it.'

'What is a nester?' asked Rex.

'Well, I'll tell yuh it all depends on the point of view. To me, a nester is jist another settler, tryin' to git along. To the cowman, whose range this settler settles on, he's somethin' to git rid of damn quick. Most of 'em are fence-builders. We don't like fences in this country. When a nester squats on a piece of land, he puts bob-wire all the way around it, and inside that fence is usually a good spring. And if yuh git enough nesters — good-bye cow country.'

'It is all Greek to me,' said Rex honestly. 'But I suppose I'll understand it all after I've lived in this country for a while.'

'Oh, shore. You stay around here twenty-five years like I have, and you'll be answerin' fool questions, just the same as I have to now. Had yore dinner? No. Well, she's a hard trip to Mesa City,

pardner; so me and you better upholster the old insides with some ham and aigs.'

'This air surely does give one an appetite.'

'Mm-m-m-m. If you're jist speakin' for yourself, you better include me, and make it appetites for two.'

After they finished their meal, Rex was introduced to the first four-horse stage he had ever seen. In fact, he had never seen four horses hitched to a vehicle before, and he marveled at the way Bunty Smith handled them. Rex was the only passenger, and he perched on the seat with Bunty, while between them reposed a sawed-off shotgun. Bunty had showed him how to operate the gun.

'If anythin' goes wrong — grab her and start throwin' lead. There's ten buckshot in every shell, and that old sheep-laig Winchester holds six shells. Didja ever do any drivin'?'

'Well,' Rex colored slightly, 'I — I have driven. You see, I got this discolored eye while driving a delivery wagon.'

'Runaway team?'

'Something like that. You see, I was trying to get away from a fire department, and I had to stop quickly, because a truck had blocked me; so I — I threw out the anchor.'

Bunty squinted sideways at Rex, spat thoughtfully, and removed the shotgun.

'Didja reach port safely?' he asked.

'I sailed right into a clothing store.'

'O-o-o-oh, yea-a-a-ah!'

Bunty swung his long lash, snapping it sharply over the rump of a lagging leader, and the ensuing jerk almost upset Rex. Bunty decided that he had a crazy man on board. The idea of throwing out an anchor to stop a team! He spat violently and wondered how they got that way.

'My mother died a few days ago,' offered Rex, as they jolted up along the Coyote Cañon grades.

'Thasso? That's tough luck. You got any more folks?'

'I guess not,' sighed Rex. 'Since she died, I find that there are many things I don't understand. I don't even know who my father was.'

'No-o-o? You're kind of an *orejano*.'

'I don't know what that is, Mr. Smith.'

'You'll probably learn. Educated, ain't yuh?'

'I have been taught quite a lot. I never went to a public school. Mother was always very particular in that respect.'

'Yuh didn't go to school?' Bunty didn't understand.

'No; I had a private tutor.'

'Horned-frawgs! You ain't aimin' to start a band in a town like Mesa City, are yuh?'

'I don't know anything about a band, Mr. Smith.'

'Uh-huh. Kinda warm, ain't it. If you ain't used to this atmosphere, you're liable to feel it.'

Bunty swung the four horses around a hairpin turn, where the outer wheels ran perilously close to the edge of the cañon. It was blue down there, and Rex could look down at the back and outspread wings of a circling hawk.

'My, it is a long way to the bottom!' exclaimed Rex.

'You can't even see it,' grinned Bunty. 'On this here road a driver is jist allowed one mistake. The last man who drove off the edge fell so danged far that his clothes was out of style when he hit bottom.'

'Really?'

'Shore. Styles change every few years, they tell me.'

It was a long, tedious drag over the grades, and it required all of Bunty's skill. Rex looked at upside down landscapes until his eyes ached, and he wondered why in the world so much of the country had been set on edge.

Finally they struck the down-grade, where Bunty locked the rear wheels and they went skidding down, with the wheel horses holding back against the firm pull of the lines.

But something went wrong. Perhaps the old leather shoes nailed to the brake-blocks, had worn

out, and the friction of iron-shod wheels against wood was not sufficient to hold back the heavy stage. At any rate, the stage lunged ahead, crowding close against the rumps of the wheeler, skidding sideways in the gravel road-bed.

But Bunty Smith was no novice. With a wild yell at the team he slackened the lines, while his long whip curled over the team with a vicious snap. And the team sprang ahead, yanking the stage around, and they went down that dangerous grade, all four horses at a furious gallop, while Bunty braced his feet and sent his lash licking at the two running leaders. He knew he must keep them at top speed in order to hold the stretcher taut.

If one of the wheel horses ever got his front feet over that stretcher, it would throw the wheeler and cause both team and stage to pile up on a smashing heap, either against the inner wall of the grade or down into the depths.

There were plenty of curves. Rex clung to the seat, blinded with fear, as the old stage lurched and skidded, going faster each moment. On the right-hand curves it seemed to him that the entire stage was off the grade, but at the next lurch it was back on the grade again. He did not realize that Bunty Smith was making the drive of his life. He couldn't see the lurch and sway of Bunty's body, as he guessed his turns to the *n*th degree.

To Rex it was a runaway; to Bunty, a case of life or death, speed and yet more speed, it all depending on his control of the running team. He knew that road; knew that he could reach the bottom now, if the horses would only keep their feet. On the next turn he saw one of his leaders swing out so far that there was nothing under him but blue atmosphere. But in a flash the momentum of the other leader had yanked him back to the edge of the grade.

Only one more curve now. Bunty set his jaw and fairly flung the team around. A rear wheel struck a projecting rock, and for several moments it was an even bet as to whether the stage would right itself. Rex was clawing at the seat, fearful of being thrown over the edge; but the stage righted itself and they went thundering down through a cottonwood thicket.

The road was level here, but very narrow. Bunty relaxed wearily, although the stage was going almost as fast as it had been. But he knew the danger was over.

Gradually he slowed down the team, but they were still galloping when a chuck-hole caused the stage to swerve. Came a sickening lurch, the crash of a wheel, and Rex felt himself shoot off the seat and go head over heels into the brush beside the road.

The foliage broke the force of his fall, but he was

still dazed when he staggered back to the road, where Bunty was trying to get a struggling leader to his feet. The rest of the team were standing with lowered heads, blowing heavily from their long run down the mountain.

The leader finally managed to struggle to his feet, after being partly unhitched, and Bunty quickly fastened the tugs again. He turned and looked at Rex, and a slow grin overspread his face.

'You took quite a hoolihan, didn't yuh, pardner? Whooee! That was quite some ride. Thought for a while that I had m' right hand stretched out for a harp.'

'What ha-happened?' stammered Rex.

'Busted a front wheel on a boulder, dang the luck. Chuck-hole skidded us into it.'

He went around and tried to examine the extent of the damage, but the brush was so thick and the wheel was so embedded in the brush and rocks that he was unable to see just how bad it was.

Bunty squinted at the sun, swore hollowly, and sat down to smoke a cigarette. Although it would soon be sundown, he did not hurry. He was due in Mesa City before dark, but there was no hard-and-fast schedule.

After due deliberation he unhitched the team, tied them to a tree, and made an examination of the broken wheel. But it was too badly damaged for

further progress; so they sat down to wait until some one should come along.

'Got to take a chance that some puncher will ride along here,' he told Rex. 'We're hung up until somebody shows up and gets us some help.'

Bunty was afraid to leave the stage. He had a fairly large load of stuff for Mesa City, the mail and express. It was in his charge, and he was most surely not going to leave it in charge of Rex. He considered Rex mildly insane.

The sun went down and the air grew chill, but no one came along. It was growing dark when Bunty got an idea.

'Can you ride a horse?' he asked.

'I never have,' replied Rex.

'Well, you're old enough. I'll tell yuh what we'll do. That off leader of mine is broke to ride. We'll take off the harness and you can ride to Mesa City. Go to the stage office, tell 'em what happened, and they can come down here with a rig to haul this stuff in.'

'I don't know whether I can ride or not,' said Rex dubiously. 'But I'll do the best I can, Mr. Smith.'

'That'll be fine, Mr. Morgan. By Gad, though, if you don't quit callin' me Mr. Smith, I'll run yore hocks off. My name is Bunty. Mr. Smith was my father's name.'

'My first name is Rex.'

'Wrecks? Fittin' title. Brother, you almost had my whole outfit named after yuh.'

Bunty unharnessed the horse, leaving the bridle, to the bit of which he fastened a rope. Rex looked the horse over dubiously. It was rather a formidable order for one who had never been on a horse.

'C'mere and I'll give yuh a leg,' ordered Bunty.

'I shall probably need an extra one,' said Rex, who was not without a sense of humor, even if he did not understand what Bunty meant.

But he managed to get on, almost falling off the other side, as the horse twisted nervously.

'Give him his head,' grunted Bunty. 'Don't yank! Keep on the road and yuh can't miss the town. And tell 'em to come, and quick as they can.'

'Yes, sir,' said Rex politely, as he rode away, keeping a tight rein on the animal.

After the first shock of being on the horse, he began to rather enjoy the sensation. He thumped the animal with his heels, and was almost unseated when the horse jerked ahead quickly.

'That is what makes them go,' decided Rex, wishing it was daylight instead of darkness.

It seemed rather lonesome until some coyotes started yapping from the side of a hill, which cheered Rex up a little. He thought they were dogs.

But Bunty Smith had made a mistake in not explaining to Rex that there were other roads, which might confuse a man who knew as little about roads as Rex did. It was too dark for Rex to tell one road from another, and when the horse stopped at the forks of a road, Rex didn't know just what to do.

But after due deliberation Rex decided that the horse knew more about the roads than he did; so let the horse decide. And so he rode along through the night, expecting at any time to reach Mesa City, when he suddenly found himself faced by the bulky outlines of a big gate.

It seemed that beyond this gate he could see the dim outlines of a house, but he could not be sure. He slid off the horse, swung the gate open, and led the animal toward the house, intending to find out, if possible, where he was, before going any farther.

It was a house, and as Rex drew nearer he saw a man come toward him. He could not see very plainly. The man came close to him, asking him what he wanted, and before Rex could reply; something crashed down on his head, and his consciousness went out in a blaze of fireworks.

Several hours later, Bert Roddy and Spike Cahill came back to the 6 × 6, and on the way they picked up the horse Rex had ridden. It was between the ranch and the main road. Spike looked it over

by the light of a match, and found it to be a horse that the 6 × 6 had sold to Bunty Smith.

'Somebody's been ridin' it with a work-bridle and a rope reins,' he told Bert. 'I reckon we better pick him up, and turn him back to Bunty.'

They found Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs and Dell Bowen asleep in the bunk-house, woke them up rudely and were cursed for their pains.

'Now that we know all about our ancestors, mebby we better hit the hay,' chuckled Spike. 'She's been a large evenin', Bertram Roddy, E-squire.'

'And to be forgotten,' reminded Bert.

CHAPTER VI

SHIFTING THE EVIDENCE

It was daylight when Rex Morgan awoke. He was conscious of a dull headache, the strong odor of liniment, and of the fact that he was in a bed. He shifted his eyes and looked around the living-room of the Lane home, which was unfamiliar to him. Then he turned his head slightly and looked toward a window, where Nan Lane was standing, looking through the window.

He studied her profile for several moments. That she was a very pretty girl, he decided. Rex knew very little about girls, but he thought she was pretty. He felt of his head and found it heavily bandaged. Some of the incidents of the previous day flashed through his mind, but they seemed like a dream now.

The mad race down the crooked grade, the smashing of the stage wheel, his ride through the dark on a bareback horse — all unreal to him now. Nan turned from the window and looked at him.

'Hello,' he said weakly. She came over to the bed and smiled at him.

'Oh, I'm glad you are awake,' she said. 'I was

just a little afraid. Dad said you had been hit pretty hard.'

'Pretty hard,' parroted Rex. 'I don't seem to remember much about it.'

He blinked painfully, but tried to smile.

'We found you out by the porch,' she said, indicating the front of the house. 'Dad heard a noise out there, and he found you near the bottom step. He thought it was one of the 6 × 6 outfit. Two of them were here earlier in the evening, and Dad almost had trouble with them.'

'I — I remember something about it now,' said Rex. 'I was trying to find my way to Mesa City. The stage broke down, and Mr. Smith sent me for help. Perhaps I got on the wrong road.'

'And then what happened to you?'

'I really don't know. There was a man at the corner of the house, and he came up to me in the dark. He asked me what I wanted, but before I had a chance to answer ——'

'He hit you?'

'I — I think he did.'

Nan walked back to the window, a puzzled expression in her eyes. Was it some of the 6 × 6, hiding at the corner of the house at night, watching for her brother, she wondered?

'You didn't see what this man looked like, did you?' she asked.

'No. You see, it was quite dark.'

A lone horseman was coming down the road, and Nan watched him ride in at the ranch. It was Lem Sheeley, the fat sheriff. She stepped out on the porch and met him, leaving the door partly open. Rex heard her call him by name, and heard him ask her if she had seen any strangers around.

'Bunty Smith had a passenger yesterday,' explained Lem. 'The stage busted down at this end of the Coyote grades and Bunty sent this stranger to Mesa City after help. But he never got to town, and Bunty spent the night out there, waitin' for him to come back. Now, we can't find the stranger nor Bunty's horse.'

'I guess I've got the man you are looking for, Mr. Sheeley,' said Nan. 'Come in and talk to him about it.'

The sheriff followed Nan into the house, where Rex had propped himself up in bed. The sheriff studied Rex quizzically for several moments. Then —

'You look as though you'd bumped into somethin'.'

'I guess I did.'

'Mind tellin' me what happened?'

Rex told him all he knew about it, and the sheriff questioned him closely. And then Nan told him about her father finding the two 6 × 6 cowboys fighting near the stable.

'This morning we found two six-shooters and a bottle of whiskey near the stable,' she added. 'One gun had been fired once.'

'Funny business,' mused the sheriff.

'Nothing funny about it,' retorted Nan. 'They're trying to find Walter. I believe that these two men were watching for him to come back, and accidentally came together, both thinking the other to be my brother. And one of the outfit stayed here, still watching, and when this man came, he knocked him down. That's the only explanation I can see.'

'Looks thataway,' agreed Lem. 'They're a hard outfit.'

He turned to Rex. 'What's yore name?'

'Rex Morgan.'

'Yea-a-ah?' Lem rubbed his chin wonderingly. 'Morgan, eh? Any relation to the Morgans around here?'

'I don't suppose so.'

'No-o-o-o? Huh!' Lem hunched his shoulders, leaned his elbows on his knees and considered Rex closely.

'You used to be a sailor, didn't yuh?'

'No.'

'Uh-huh. Bunty thought yuh did.'

'I don't think I mentioned such a thing to him.'

'Mebbe not. Bunty prob'ly had a few drinks.

He said yuh told him about stoppin' a runaway team by throwin' out the anchor.'

'And I did,' smiled Rex.

'Shore,' agreed Lem heartily. 'Lotsa folks do. He tells me that yuh came to Mesa City out of curiosity.'

'That is true; I did. My mother died a short while ago. I guess I don't know much, except what I learned from books,' he confessed wearily. 'After she died I began to realize it more than ever. I have never worked. As long as I can remember I have always studied.

'It never occurred to me that my mother had an income of some kind. She never mentioned the fact that I had any relatives. Why, I don't even know who my father was. That is the truth, as strange as it may seem. But after she died, I found a letter or rather an envelope, inside of which was a check for seventy-five dollars. It had been sent from Mesa City. I couldn't read the signature on the check, you see. There was really nothing to keep me; so I came here, because I was curious.'

'Well, I'll be darned!' exclaimed Lem. 'Yore name's Morgan, too, eh?'

'Yes.'

'Yuh don't know what became of the horse, do yuh?'

'Naturally not. I — I think I better get up.

My head feels much better, and I'm awfully hungry.'

'I reckon yuh ain't goin' to die from a tunk on the head,' grinned Lem. He got to his feet and picked up his hat. 'I reckon I'll be foggin' along, Miss Lane.'

Nan went out on the porch with Lem, where they talked together for several minutes.

'I dunno what to do about that 6 × 6 outfit,' said Lem. 'If they get yore brother, they'll hang him sure; so yuh better get word to him to lay low. Accordin' to my way of thinkin', it was self-defense. If I get him, I'll lock him up, of course. Have to, because it's my duty.

'And you keep an eye on this young Morgan. Bunty Smith says he's as crazy as a loon. Of course, yuh can discount what Bunty says, because Bunty was as sore as a boil. He says this young feller will have more twists than a pretzel when he gets through with him. Well, I'll be goin'. If I see Pete Morgan, I'll tell him to keep his punchers off this place.'

'Thank you very much, Mr. Sheeley.'

'Oh, you're welcome. Only I don't like that Mister part. I answers to "Lem" pretty well.'

'All right, Lem.'

'Gosh!' Lem turned with a big grin. 'What I'll tell old Pete Morgan will be a-plenty, ma'am.'

'My friends call me Nan.'

'That shore is a pretty name, Nan. You tell yore brother that the law'll give him a square deal. Only I wish he hadn't took Ben's gun and horse. That looks bad. Well, I'll see yuh later.'

As Nan turned to go into the house, Rex was standing in the doorway. He had been fully dressed, except for his shoes and coat; so it had been a simple matter to make himself presentable.

'What did he mean by saying that I am crazy?' he demanded.

Nan colored quickly, realizing that Rex had heard what the sheriff had said.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said dubiously.

Rex watched the expression of her face for several moments.

'I think you are very pretty,' he said. 'Yes, I think you are quite the nicest-looking girl I have ever seen.'

'I wonder if the sheriff wasn't right?' laughed Nan.

'Do you think I'm crazy to say such things?'

'In my opinion — yes.'

'Well, I'm not. Outside of a very sore head, I'm all right. I heard what the sheriff said about your brother, and it leads me to believe that it was your brother who shot that cowboy they brought to Cañonville.'

'They say he shot Ben Leach,' said Nan. 'I don't believe he did.'

'No one saw the shooting?'

'Not a soul.'

Rex rubbed his bandaged head thoughtfully.

'What will they do if they catch him?'

'You heard what the sheriff said, didn't you?'

'He said they'd hang him. That hardly seems fair to me. This country is rather elemental, I fear. The ticket agent told me that he preferred civilization when I asked him if he had ever been at Mesa City — and I'm beginning to realize what he meant.'

Nan smiled wearily and shook her head.

'I'm afraid you won't do — in this country, Mr. Morgan. It is too big for a man who has been raised on books.'

'Still, I like it,' he said slowly. 'Perhaps I won't do, as you say. And I have been raised on books. I am what Bunty Smith would probably call an educated damn fool. Oh, I heard that expression a long time ago, but I didn't know until a few days ago just what it meant.'

Nan laughed softly. 'Perhaps you might be able to forget some of the things you learned out of books.'

'I can try. A few more blows on the head, and I probably won't have to work hard to forget.'

'Do you intend to stay in this country?'

'I didn't — at first,' he said thoughtfully. 'But now I rather think I may.'

'But what will you do for a living?'

'What is there to be done?'

'You might work as a cowboy,' said Nan, smiling.

'Yes, I might. Did you know you have a dimple in each cheek when you smile?'

'I think we better change the bandage on your head,' said Nan severely. 'You lie down while I get the hot water and some clean cloth. I think you're feverish.'

The sheriff rode back to Mesa City, trying to puzzle out who this young Morgan might be and just what he was doing in that country. He was satisfied that some of the 6 × 6 outfit had been at the Lane ranch, watching for Long Lane, and had probably hit Morgan over the head with a gun, possibly mistaking him for some one who was liable to interfere with them.

He found Bunty Smith, Spike Cahill, and Bert Roddy in the Oasis saloon.

'I got my horse,' said Bunty. 'Spike and Bert brought him in this mornin', Lem.'

'Where did you boys find him?' asked Lem.

'Out at the ranch. Probably dumped that young feller off and came home. Yuh see, that horse was raised on the 6 × 6.'

Lem nodded with understanding.

'But where's the young feller?' wondered Bunty.

At this moment Dave Morgan and Cal Dickenson came in, but Lem Sheeley paid no attention to them. As soon as the greeting was over, Lem came right to the point.

'As far as that young feller is concerned,' he said slowly, 'he's out at the Lane place, nursin' a busted head. I don't reckon I've got to tell you and Bert that, Spike.'

Spike looked at him blankly and then at Bert.

'Yuh see, I happen to know that old man Lane found you two jaspers fightin' at his place last night. I dunno why yuh fought each other, and it's none of my business; but a little later this — or it might have been before yore fight, as far as I know — this young feller, who says his name's Morgan, showed up there and got belted over the head.'

'Honest to God, we don't know nothin' about him,' declared Spike solemnly.

'Of course not,' smiled Lem. 'I didn't reckon yuh would. But that's what happened.'

Spike rubbed his chin and looked at Bert.

'What do yuh know about that, Bert?'

'I think he's crazy,' replied Bert.

'I know damn well he is!' blurted Bunty. 'Why, some of the things he told me on the way from Cañonville ——'

'I'm talkin' about Lem Sheeley,' interrupted Bert.

'Oh! Well, I'd like to know how that kid got over to Lane's place. I told him to stay on the road, the damn fool.'

'But you didn't say which road,' laughed Spike.

'I suppose not. Gee, I shore wanted to get my hands on him, makin' me spend the night out there, without even a blanket. I'll buy a drink.'

'Mebby this young Morgan is one of yore long-lost relatives, Dave,' suggested Spike.

Dave Morgan laughed, as he poured out a drink.

'Might be, Spike. Still, I suppose there's a lot of Morgans scattered over the face of the earth. Well, here's happy days, boys.'

'Where's Pete?' he asked Spike, after they had finished their drink.

'I dunno. He must have pulled out early this mornin'. Didn't say anythin' about goin'. Fact of the matter is, he didn't wait for breakfast. When Briggs got breakfast ready, we found that the old man was gone. His horse and saddle were missin'; so we decided he left early. We thought we'd find him here in town. Did you just come from the Lane place, Lem?'

'Yeah,' nodded the sheriff.

'Didn't see anythin' of Pete Morgan?'

'Nope. Did he intend goin' over there?'

'You heard about Pete and old man Lane havin' a fight yesterday, didn't yuh, Lem?'

Lem hadn't. He listened to the details according to Dave Morgan, who had seen it all.

'But that wouldn't send Peter Morgan over to Lane's place early this mornin', would it?' queried Lem. 'Seems to me that he'd keep away. I understand that Lane has home-steaded that ranch.'

'Well, he drew a deadline on the 6 × 6,' laughed Dave. 'If Joe Cave hadn't acted real quick, Lane would have shot Pete.'

'I suppose,' said Spike thoughtfully, 'it wouldn't do me and Bert a damn bit of good to deny that we hit this young Morgan, would it, Lem?'

'I dunno,' smiled the sheriff. 'It might, if you'd tell me why you and Bert were fightin' each other out there.'

'That was a mistake,' said Bert quickly. 'It was dark, and we didn't recognize each other, Lem.'

But further than that neither of them was willing to commit himself.

'Found any trace of Long Lane?' asked Dave Morgan.

'Not any,' said the sheriff.

'Lookin' for any?' asked Spike sarcastically.

'That's my business, Spike. And I don't need any bushwhackin' help from the 6 × 6. You fellers better keep away from Lane's place. Accordin' to

law he owns that ranch, and he's given yuh plenty of warnin'.'

Spike subsided. He knew Lem Sheeley to be a two-fisted fighter and a fast man with a gun; so there would be little satisfaction gained in starting trouble with him.

'You evidently don't consider Long Lane a murderer, do yuh, Lem?' asked Dave Morgan.

'Why should I? Ben Leach followed him, didn't he? He didn't have any idea of kissin' Lane when they met, did he? No, I don't consider it murder, Dave.'

'But Lane took his gun and horse. Yuh might at least arrest him for stealin' the horse,' said Spike.

'Do you *know* he took the horse?'

'Well, the horse is gone, ain't it?'

'Does that prove Lane took it?'

'Oh, hell!' snorted Spike. 'You talk in circles and ask questions all the time. C'mon, Bert.'

Bert was willing to leave, and a few minutes later Dave Morgan and Cal Dickenson left the saloon.

In the meantime Nan Lane had put a fresh bandage on Rex Morgan's head, and he sprawled back in a rocker, watching her working around the room.

'Where is your father?' he asked suddenly.

Nan shook her head. 'Out in the hills somewhere.'

'With your brother?'

'I can't answer that question.'

'Have you a sweetheart?'

Nan turned quickly. He was not joking. His eyes were deadly serious.

'Of all things!' she exclaimed. 'You're feverish again.'

'Nothing of the kind. Please answer the question.'

'Nothing of the kind,' she mimicked him. 'Why did you ask such a foolish question?'

'Most girls do have sweethearts, do they not?'

'I really don't know — possibly.'

She laughed and listened intently. From down at the stable came the cackle of a hen, announcing to the world that she had produced an egg. Following this came the hoarse crow of a rooster. Nan laughed and turned to Rex.

'Cut, cut, cut goes the little brown hen;
She cut, cut, cuts a warning,
Then the rooster crows and everybody knows
We'll have eggs for breakfast in the morning.'

'Is that what it means?' laughed Rex.

'Didn't you ever hear that before? That was the first poem I ever learned. We have only a dozen hens, and only six are laying; so I better get that egg before a coyote or a bob-cat finds it.'

She went out through the kitchen door, and Rex

heard her going toward the stable. She had not invited him to go with her, but he decided to go anyway. His head was a bit light, he found, and his knees were weak, but otherwise he felt all right.

Nan went down to the stable, searching for the nest, but was unable to find it. The chickens were in the willows beyond the corral; so she crawled through the corral fence. The corrals of the Lane ranch surrounded one side and the rear of the stable, being almost an L in shape, with a cross-fence separating it into two units.

Nan entered the smaller corral and walked back to the cross-fence near the corner of the stable, intending to go through the gate, but as she glanced through the fence she stopped short.

On the ground, at the corner of the stable, she could see part of a shoulder and the left arm of a man. The fingers were splayed out in the dirt; the sleeve drawn back sharply showed a hairy wrist.

Nan flung the gate open and stepped to the corner of the stable, her eyes filled with horror. The man was lying close against the rear of the stable, as though he had been leaning against the wall, and had hardly moved after falling. His right arm was twisted back, almost under his right leg, and Nan could see the butt of a six-shooter.

Forgetting her fear for a moment, she stepped forward, took hold of his shoulder and gave a slight

pull. The body turned over easily and she looked down into the contorted features of Peter Morgan.

With a stifled scream she stepped back, staring down at the corpse, looking dazedly at the earthly remains of the man who had been her father's enemy.

'What do you suppose happened to him?' asked a voice, and she jerked around quickly to face Rex Morgan, who had stepped through the gate and was looking at the body.

'My God!' she whispered. 'That is Peter Morgan!'

'*Was* Peter Morgan,' corrected Rex unemotionally. 'Dead, isn't he? I never saw a dead man before. He must have been struck over the head, too. Queer, isn't it?'

'Queer?' Nan struggled to keep her voice calm. If she ever needed self-possession she needed it now.

'Queer about him getting hit on the head, I mean. It seems to be sort of a habit around here.'

Nan leaned against the wall of the stable, trying to think just what to do.

'Who do you suppose killed him?' queried Rex. It was rather strange that he wasn't at all excited.

'Oh, don't you see what it will mean?' whispered Nan. 'This is Peter Morgan. He hated my father, and my father has threatened to kill any of his outfit that came here.'

'Your father threatened him? Do you suppose he killed him?'

'I — I don't know. No! Why, if he killed him, he wouldn't leave the body there — here. But they won't believe it. My father left here early this morning. Why — why he and Morgan had a fight in Mesa City yesterday. This is terrible!'

'I begin to understand,' said Rex slowly. 'If they find the body here, they will say your father killed him.'

'Yes, yes! Oh, what can I do?'

'Well, the first thing to do is to get rid of the body, I suppose. Of course the man is dead, and it won't make a particle of difference to him. I think we ——'

Nan had stepped to the gate and was looking down toward the willow-lined creek, where a saddled horse stood, barely visible to them. It was a tall roan; the riding horse of Peter Morgan.

'That was his horse,' she told Rex. 'He must have tied it down there, and then ——'

'Came looking for trouble.'

'Oh, I suppose,' wearily. 'But what can we do, Rex?'

It was the first time she had called him Rex.

'I was just wondering what would be the proper thing to do,' he replied. 'You see, I haven't many ideas on the subject. My idea of it would be to get

the body away from here and let them find it elsewhere. That would, at least, turn the finger of direct suspicion from your father; and that seems to be the primary idea, doesn't it?'

Nan nodded quickly. 'But how can we, Rex? Suppose some one saw us?'

'I don't know anything about what they would do, Nan. I just had an idea. I — you wait here a minute.'

He crossed the corral, climbed through the fence and came back shortly, leading the saddled horse.

'We would have to dispose of the horse, too,' he said, eyeing the body. 'Suppose you get some rope.'

'Do you mean to — to tie the body on the horse?'

'Something like that, I think it can be done.'

Nan secured a length of spot-cord lariat and came back to him.

'I was just thinking again,' smiled Rex. 'The body is very stiff, and I wonder if — no, I guess we better just drape him across the saddle. Do you feel capable of helping me lift him up, Nan?'

She shut her eyes tightly, but nodded in the affirmative. It was a tough job. Rex was none too strong, and Nan's natural aversion to touching the body did not add any material strength to her arms.

But they finally managed to place the body across the saddle, face down, and together they roped it

tightly. Rex knew nothing about knots; so he let Nan tie off the ropes. Luckily it was a gentle horse.

'Now, that is done,' said Rex thankfully.

'But what next?' asked Nan anxiously, scanning the hills. She was mortally afraid some one would come before the coast was clear.

'Would this horse go home?' asked Rex.

'It might. Oh, that would ——'

'Let's try it, Nan.'

Slowly he led the horse through the rear gate. They had tied the reins to the saddle-horn. Pointing the animal away from the ranch, he gave it a slap with his open palm, and the animal went trotting away, heading back toward the 6 × 6.

For a long time they stood there together, watching the hills, and once they saw the animal with its grisly burden, a mile away, still going. Nan's face was very white as she turned to Rex and held out her hand.

'Thank you, Rex,' she said simply.

'You are welcome, Nan. It was nothing.'

'But if it was known, we would both go to jail for a long time.'

Rex shuddered slightly. 'Is that a fact, Nan?'

'Yes — we must never tell. The law would blame us equally with the one who killed him.'

'Well, that is all right. I — I mean — it does matter. You see, I don't want anything to happen

to you. I never did touch a dead man before, and my head hurts now, but it is all right. You see, I — I ——'

His hands slipped off the fence and he fell in a heap at her feet. Quickly she knelt in the dust of the corral and took his head in her lap. His face was bloodless. She knew she could not carry him to the house. For a moment she hesitated on just what to do, but finally lowered his head to the ground and got quickly to her feet, intending to go to the house after some water, but as she turned toward the gate she saw the sheriff riding up to the corral. It was evident he had seen her, and was coming there instead of to the house.

He rode up along the fence, swinging his hat in his hand, a smile on his face.

'Howdy, Miss Lane,' he said pleasantly, and then saw Rex on the ground. He dismounted quickly and came over to the fence.

'He — he fainted,' faltered Nan, fearful that the sheriff had seen the horse and its burden leave the corral.

'Shore looks white, ma'am.'

'I was just going after some water.'

'I'll get yuh some,' he said quickly. He walked to the open gate, but stopped and picked up Peter Morgan's revolver.

Nan's heart sank when she saw it. Would he

recognize the gun, she wondered? But he merely gave it a sharp glance and went on to the house, carrying it in his hand.

But she noticed when he came back that the gun was not in evidence, nor did he mention finding it. He poured some of the water over Rex's head, and the shock of the cold water brought him back to consciousness. He sat up, blinking foolishly.

'This is the sheriff,' said Nan. 'You've met him before.'

'Kinda went down and out, didn't yuh?' smiled the sheriff.

Rex nodded quickly. 'Foolish of me to faint. I guess my head isn't very good yet.'

He looked searchingly at Nan. 'Did you find them?' he asked.

'Find what?' asked the sheriff, before Nan could reply.

'The eggs,' said Rex. 'The hen called, you know; and we went hunting the egg. Queer, isn't it? And I fainted.'

The sheriff smiled thinly. He had seen the look which passed between them.

'Can yuh navigate all right?' he asked.

'Oh, I am all right now.'

'I just dropped in to tell you that the horse you rode last night was picked up at the 6 × 6 ranch and brought back to Mesa City. The horse came

from there, yuh see; so that would be where he'd go.'

'Well, I am glad they got it back, and thank you for telling me.'

'Oh, you're welcome.'

He climbed the fence and mounted his horse.

'I'll see yuh later,' he said.

'Come any time, Lem,' called Nan.

'Thank yuh, Nan — I shore will.'

'Whew!' exclaimed Rex weakly. 'That was a close call. You don't think he saw what we did, do you?'

'I'm sure he didn't. But somehow I don't feel that he believed about the eggs.'

'Well, we are not in jail,' grinned Rex.

They walked back to the front of the house, and Rex stood there quite a while, thinking over the events of the night before. He distinctly remembered that there had been a big gate. Where was that gate now, he wondered? There was no big gate at the Lane ranch. In fact, there were no fences around the place, except the corral, and he was very sure he did not come through the corral. Finally he went over to the house and sat down on the porch, trying to reconstruct the locale, as well as he could, of the place where he had been knocked out.

And while Rex Morgan pondered over these things, Lem Sheeley rode back to Cañonville, also

thinking deeply. From inside his shirt-bosom he removed a heavy Colt revolver and examined it closely.

It was of forty-five caliber, with white bone handles, and on one handle had been carved the initials 'P. M.'

'"P. M.,"' he said to himself. 'That's Peter Morgan's gun; I remember them bone handles. But what was Peter Morgan's gun doin' in the Lane corral? I'll betcha he was over there tryin' to raise a little hell with Lane and lost the gun. Serves him right, and I'll shore tell him so when I give him the gun.'

CHAPTER VII

HASHKNIFE AND SLEEPY DRIFT IN

Along a sandy road, which leads northward from Cañonville, came two cowboys that afternoon. They were not traveling fast, because of the fact that both horses were footsore and weary. The fact of the matter was, they were cowboy 'tourists,' heading south for the winter.

The one on the tall, gray horse whistled unmusically between his teeth and surveyed the landscape through a pair of level, gray eyes. He was also tall, thin, with a long, rather serious face, generous nose and a wide mouth. His well-worn Stetson was tilted forward over his eyes, shading his face from the western sun. He wore a pale blue shirt, a nondescript vest, which was little more than a drape on each side of his chest, and a pair of batwing chaps. Around his waist was a weathered, hand-made cartridge belt, supporting an old holster, from which protruded the black handle of a big Colt gun. His boots were extra high of heel, and his spurs had been dulled until there was little left except a circle of steel.

The other man was shorter, broader of shoulder, with a deep-lined, grin-wrinkled face, out of which

looked a pair of innocent blue eyes. Their raiment was about the same, their riding rigs much alike. The shorter man rode a chunky sorrel, which was forced to singlefoot in order to keep up with the swinging walk of the tall gray.

'Ain't seen a cow for forty miles, Hashknife,' said 'Sleepy' Stevens, the short one of the duo, breaking a long silence.

'Hashknife' Hartley turned in his saddle and smiled at Sleepy.

'Mebby it's a lucky thing for the cows, cowboy. Any cow that could live in the country we've gone through would have to imagine a lot. But we didn't come lookin' for cows — we came for the climate.'

'Shore,' admitted Sleepy.

'And this is climate.'

'In the daytime,' admitted Sleepy. 'Last night I dang near froze. When we hit a town, I'm goin' to have at a reg'lar bed. Didn't that shepherd tell us it was only twenty miles to Cañonville?'

'Sheep-herder's miles, Sleepy.'

'I reckon that's right.'

They rode in over the crest of a hill and saw the town of Cañonville ahead of them.

'That's her,' proclaimed Hashknife. 'The first thing on my programme is to wrap m'self around about four eggs and a couple o' slices of a hawg's hind leg.'

'Yea, brother. And set on somethin' besides a saddle or a cactus. Man, I'm plumb rode out. When we talked about comin' to Arizona for the winter, I took a look at a map, and I seen a couple of two-inch squares, pink and orange, which represented what we has to cover in order to reach this here destination.

'It looked easy, Hashknife. There wasn't a danged thing difficult-lookin' about it; no hills, no cactus, no sand; jist pink and orange. And only two inches of it. I'd like to meet the jigger that drew the map I looked at.'

Hashknife smiled and shook his head.

'We shore earned a rest in a sunny land, Sleepy. I'll bet these broncs will be glad to lean up ag'in' a load of oats. They wasn't raised to browse off a Spanish dagger.'

Cañonville looked exactly like several of the Arizona towns they had passed through; a typical Arizona cow-town on a railroad. Many of the buildings were of adobe, the rest weathered frame, with false fronts.

They rode straight to the livery-stable, where they put up their horses, and then went hunting a restaurant. It was there that they met Noah Evans, the deputy sheriff, humped in a chair as he waited for his meal to be served.

He gave Hashknife and Sleepy a sharp glance,

noted their general appearance, and nodded a welcome. Noah needed some one to talk with, and a stranger would be a boon. Hashknife and Sleepy slid into chairs across the table from Noah and gave their order to the waiter.

'Jist got in, didn't yuh?' asked Noah.

'Not fifteen minutes ago,' said Hashknife. 'How's everythin' down here?'

'Kind of a broad question, stranger.'

'Crime, for instance.'

Hashknife had noticed the badge of office on Noah's shirt-bosom.

'Crime? Huh! Ain't none,' gloomily. 'Ain't been none since me and Lem Sheeley's been runnin' the office.'

'Lem's the sheriff, eh?'

'Y'betcha. And he's a dinger, too. Was a dinger,' he corrected himself sadly.

'Somebody plant him?'

'Na-a-aw! Yuh see,' Noah rested his skinny elbows on the table and considered the sugar-bowl thoughtfully, 'I figure a sheriff ort to be heart-whole and fancy-free. Otherwise he ain't capable.'

'Fell in love, eh?' smiled Hashknife.

'Accordin' to all signs of the Zodiac — he has. I'm here in town, runnin' the damned office, while he lallygags. By Gad, I hope t' be my own boss some day.'

'And if yuh was, you'd be out to see the same girl, eh?'

Noah looked up quickly, and his ears grew red.

'How do yuh make that out, stranger?'

'Observation. If it wasn't true, you wouldn't give a damn where he was.'

'Uh-huh.'

The waiter deposited Noah's food in front of him, and the conversation lagged for a few minutes. Their orders came along, and the three men busied themselves with the meal.

'Goin' to stay around here?' asked Noah.

'Dunno yet,' replied Hashknife. 'We're down here to spend the winter, but we've got to hit a cow country, where we can get work.'

'Uh-huh. From up north, eh? I used to punch cows up in the Milk River country. Used to be around Pendleton, Umatilla, and then I was over in Idaho.'

'We've been up in that country,' nodded Hashknife. 'I was born over on the Milk River.'

'Thasso? What's the name?'

'Hartley.'

'Hartley, eh? Any relation to Jim Hartley, of the Bar 77 outfit?'

'I guess so; he's my brother.'

'Well, I'll be damned! Why, me and old Jim — say! Yore dad was a preacher up in that country.

Rode an old white horse and packed the gospel. No, I didn't know him, but I heard a lot about him. They said he was the only preacher they ever had that didn't try to convert somebody. Wasn't tryin' to show folks how to die; he showed 'em how to live straight. And you're Jim's brother! You're Hennery, ain't yuh? I've heard him tell about you. My name's Evans — Noah Evans.'

They shook hands solemnly, and Hashknife introduced him to Sleepy.

'Well, well!' marveled Noah explosively. 'She's a small world, gents. I ain't seen Jim Hartley for three or four years. Spent a winter up there, and I ain't thawed out yet. Wish it was jist before dinner, I'd shore like to buy yuh both a drink.'

'We'll be here just before supper,' grinned Sleepy.

'You betcha.'

They finished their meal, and Noah invited them to come down to the office, where he talked with Hashknife about the Milk River country, naming over people whom Hashknife remembered, although it had been many years since he had been home.

While they were talking, Lem Sheeley rode in. Noah lost no time in introducing the two cowboys to the sheriff.

'Hear anythin' of young Lane?' asked Noah.

Lem shook his head wearily. 'Nothin', Noah. Probably out in the hills. Didn't see anythin' of the old man; so I reckon he's out there, too.'

'How about the girl?'

'She's home.'

Lem tried to act indifferent.

'Alone?' asked Noah.

'No-o-o.'

'Well, who in hell is with her?'

Lem slowly rolled a cigarette, as he told about Rex Morgan and his experiences. Hashknife leaned forward on his chair and absorbed every word of it, while Sleepy scowled over his cigarette, sighing wearily.

Lem told them of old man Lane discovering Spike Cahill and Bert Roddy, fighting in the dark, and Noah seemed greatly amused over that incident. Knowing that Hashknife did not know of the incidents which led up to this, Noah explained about the coming of the nester family, the persecutions of the 6 × 6, and the killing of Ben Leach.

'And this young feller says his name is Morgan, eh?' queried Noah. 'I wonder if he's any relation to Pete or Dave.'

'I dunno.' Lem shook his head. 'Bunty Smith says he's loco, but I don't see anythin' wrong with him, except that he talks like a dictionary and ain't

never been out in the sun very much. Didja ever see this?'

He took the Colt from inside his shirt and placed it on the table in front of Noah, who examined it quickly.

'That's Pete Morgan's gun, Lem. I'd know it by them handles. Spike Cahill shaped 'em for him. Said he'd make me a pair like 'em as soon as he got time. That was a year ago, which leads me to believe Spike has been pretty dang busy. Where'd yuh get it, Lem?'

'I picked it up in Lane's corral this mornin'.'

'Oh-ho-o-o-o! So old Pete went over to clean-up on old man Lane and lost his gun. I'd keep it, if I was you, Lem. Serves him right.'

'Pete Morgan and old man Lane had a fight in Mesa City yesterday, and Pete knocked him down. They tell me that the old man drawed a deadline against the 6 × 6. He tried to draw a gun on Pete, but Joe Cave blocked him. I reckon he'd have killed Pete.'

'By golly, they'll monkey with that old buzz-saw until he does kill some of 'em. You ort to go and have a talk with that 6 × 6, Lem.'

'That would do a hell of a lot of good.'

'Tough outfit?' asked Hashknife.

'No tougher than the rest, I don't suppose. But Peter Morgan has kinda bossed things around the

Mesa City country until his punchers think they can do just as they please. This nester shore slipped one over on old Pete when he homesteaded that place.

'I dunno yet why Pete didn't have somebody homestead it for him. I reckon it was because Pete thought he could keep anybody off, anyway. He's shore scared a lot of nesters off that side of the road. But Lane was jist as tough as Pete; so he's still there.'

'With his son hidin' out,' added Noah sadly.

'And the rest of the country givin' us hell because we don't smoke him out,' sighed Lem.

'What kind of a feller was this Leach?' asked Hashknife.

'Tough *hombre*,' replied Noah. 'We figure he got what he went lookin' for.'

'The only bad move Lane made was to take Ben's gun and horse,' said the sheriff. 'I reckon he was just drunk enough to take 'em. Kind of an Injun idea; kill 'em and take everythin'.'

Sleepy was humped up in a chair, looking sadly at Hashknife. Sleepy knew what this would mean. Hashknife was leaning forward, an eager expression in his gray eyes, his long, lean fingers caressing the knees of his worn chaps. Gone were all the signs of weariness from their long journey.

Fate had again thrown them into a troubled

range; Hashknife Hartley was in his element. But Hashknife was not a man-hunter. He had no interest in the outlaw, on whose head was a price.

'This young Lane ain't got Injun blood, has he?' asked Hashknife.

'No-o-o,' drawled Lem. 'But he was drunk enough to be a fool that day. He probably knew we'd be on his trail; so he heeled himself with Ben's gun and horse. Me and Noah was at his ranch when he came home, and he said he had fixed one of the 6 × 6 gang.'

'And when the 6 × 6 gang came after him, he wasn't in the house,' added Noah. 'Must 'a' went straight through the house, cut out through the hills, and picked up Ben's horse, 'cause he left his own bronc at the corral.'

'If it was self-defense, why didn't he give himself up to the law?' asked Hashknife.

'Because he's a nester,' said Lem quickly. 'He had an idea that the law wouldn't give him an even break.'

'I can understand that,' agreed Hashknife. 'And since the killin', the 6 × 6 has been hangin' around the nester's place at night, eh?'

'Y'betcha. They want young Lane. And Peter Morgan backs their play, Hartley. Some day him and old man Lane will meet for a show-down.'

'And what kind of a girl is this nester's daughter?'

'She's all right,' said Lem slowly. 'Square as a dollar.'

'And no shrinkin' vi'let,' added Noah.

'Is Peter Morgan a married man?'

'No.'

'What did Ben Leach and young Lane fight about?'

'I dunno. I heard that Ben called him a damn nester. Mebby it was mostly liquor. But Ben had no right to follow him unless he was prepared to shoot. The 6 × 6 contend that Lane saw him comin' and bushwhacked him. Can't prove it. Ben got a bullet through his head. I dunno what Lane's story would be, but he's got a good chance to prove self-defense.'

'Looks thataway,' admitted Hashknife. 'I reckon we better get us a room at the hotel, Sleepy.'

'I'll go along,' declared Noah. 'I know the jigger who runs the hotel and I'll see that he gives yuh a good room. Some of 'em has got cracked pitchers in, yuh see.'

They secured the room and spent an hour or two looking over the little town, after which they drifted back to the sheriff's office. Lem stretched out on a cot and snored audibly, while Noah talked Milk River with Hashknife.

CHAPTER VIII

REX USES HIS BRAINS

After due deliberation Rex Morgan decided that the blow on his head must have left him slightly hazy on things in general; so he gave up trying to puzzle out what had become of the gate. He did not speak to Nan about this. She sat on the porch steps with him, looking toward the 6 × 6, and he knew she was worrying over what had taken place at the corral.

'You saw the sheriff find that gun, didn't you?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'That was Peter Morgan's gun, Rex; and I'm afraid the sheriff recognized it. If he hadn't, I think he would have mentioned picking it up, and would have given it to us. They cost about thirty dollars apiece.'

'But he doesn't know Peter Morgan is dead.'

'He will. And he'll wonder how that gun got in our corral. Rex, we've got to forget it. No matter what happens, we must keep this a secret. They would hang my father, as sure as fate.'

'Well, I'm not going to tell,' declared Rex. 'I've been rather weak in the stomach since then, but I'm all right now. I don't want to go to jail, and I'd do

anything in the world before I'd tell. But I wish we had picked up that gun.'

'If wishes were horses, beggars might ride,' quoted Nan seriously.

'And be welcome to them,' smiled Rex wryly. 'I'd rather walk.'

It was an hour or so later when Paul Lane rode in and stabled his horse. Nan was in the kitchen, preparing a meal, and Rex was sitting on the front porch, reading an old magazine.

Rex had never seen the old man, but he knew it must be Nan's father. The old man came up to the porch and looked Rex over quizzically.

'How's yore head?' he asked.

'It is much better, thank you,' replied Rex. 'You are Mr. Lane? My name is Morgan.'

The old man did not offer to shake hands with him.

'What Morgan?' he asked coldly.

'What Morgan? I don't know just what you mean, Mr. Lane.'

'Any relation to the Morgans of Mesa City?'

Rex shook his head quickly. 'I guess not. At least, I don't believe I am.'

Nan heard them talking and came out to the porch.

'Yore patient recovered kinda quick, Nan,' said the old man.

'Yes,' she said softly. 'How is Walter?'

'All right. I asked him about that horse and gun. He never took 'em, Nan. He swears he never seen Ben Leach after he left the saloon.'

Nan was watching her father closely, and Rex noticed that her face was rather white, her lips compressed tightly.

'Dad,' she said hoarsely, 'what happened down by the stable this morning?'

'Eh? Down at the stable? Why, I dunno — nothin' that I know anythin' about, Nan.'

'Didn't you meet Peter Morgan?'

'Meet Peter Morgan? No! I dunno what you're talkin' about.'

He turned to Rex.

'What about you, young man? Who hit you over the head?'

'That is something I cannot tell you, Mr. Lane.'

'Mm-m-m-m. Kinda funny.'

He turned from Rex and looked at Nan closely.

'What's the matter with you?' he asked. 'What makes yuh look at me like that, Nan? Don'tcha feel well?'

'You swear you didn't meet Peter Morgan at the stable this morning?'

'I told yuh I didn't. Was he here?'

'He was here,' she said. 'I found him in the corral, near the corner of the stable — dead.'

'What?' The old man came closer to her, his eyes wide. 'Nan, you don't mean that! Not Peter Morgan!'

'He had been hit over the head,' she said slowly. 'His horse was back in the willows; so we tied him on the saddle and turned the horse loose. He had drawn his gun, and we were so anxious to get him away from here that we forgot the gun, and the sheriff came along ——'

'My God! he didn't see you, did he, Nan?'

'No, he didn't see us — but he picked up the gun and took it with him.'

The old man sat down heavily on the bottom steps and tried to get it all clear in his mind.

'We had to do something,' said Nan wearily.

The old man nodded thoughtfully.

'This young man helped you?' he asked.

'Yes, Dad; I couldn't have done it alone.'

He turned his head and looked at Rex closely.

'Where'd you come from?' he asked.

Rex explained how he happened to be in that country, and what had happened to him since he started.

'No idea who hit you last night?' asked the old man.

'Not the slightest, Mr. Lane. I don't remember a thing from the time that man stepped out to speak to me until I woke up in your home.'

'You had been hit hard, Morgan. You've got a hard head, young man. That blow would have killed most men. I dunno,' he said wearily. 'I almost wish I hadn't tried to buck the 6 × 6. My son is a fugitive, you know. I've tried to induce him to leave the country, but he won't go. Swears he never killed Leach. He won't get a square deal with a Mesa City jury, nor a jury from any other part of this range; and if the 6 × 6 outfit catch him, they'll lynch him on the spot; so what can he do?'

'But who killed Peter Morgan?' asked Nan.

'I don't know,' replied her father. 'If he was killed here, he could only blame himself. I told him what would happen. I drew a deadline for the 6 × 6. Morgan knocked me down on the street in Mesa City.'

'They'll swear you killed him, Dad. Don't you see what it means? No matter where they find the horse with the body, the sheriff found Morgan's gun in our corral.'

'That's true, Nan. We'll just have to wait and see how it turns out.'

He turned to Rex. 'If I was you, young man, I'd head for Mesa City as quick as possible. This is a dangerous place to be found. You haven't any interests here. I'm just telling you this for your own benefit.'

'But we haven't done anything, Mr. Lane. I don't know anybody in Mesa City — and I'm not afraid.'

'That's because you're ignorant of what it might mean. This is my home. I'm too old to stand trial for murder. My best days are behind me. I've got to fight.'

'I never have fought,' said Rex slowly. 'I don't know how well I could fight. But I'm not going to run away and leave you and Nan here.'

'They know he's here,' said Nan quickly.

Her father looked at her quizzically.

'Calls yuh by yore first name — and you don't want him to go, eh?'

Nan got quickly to her feet. 'I think I better start supper.'

The old man filled his pipe and smoked slowly for a while, stealing an occasional glance at Rex. Finally he got to his feet, stretched wearily.

'I dunno,' he said, as though talking to himself. 'Soft-handed tenderfoot and a nester's daughter. I had hopes she'd pick a man.'

Then he went slowly into the house, leaving Rex to wonder what he meant. He looked at his hands. They were undeniably soft, but just now not very clean. Finally he went back through the house and stood in the doorway between the living-room and kitchen, watching Nan prepare a meal. His head

ached a little and he suddenly remembered that it had been a long time since he had eaten anything.

Paul Lane came past him and entered the kitchen where he glanced at the wood-box, discovered it almost empty, and started for the back door. But he did not open it. He stopped suddenly and listened. Nan turned from the stove, holding a skillet in her hand.

It was the sound of horses' hoofs on the hard-packed ground of the yard. Unconsciously Rex crossed near the old man.

None of them said a word. Suddenly the old man reached out and flung the door open, almost swinging it back against Rex, who stepped back. In the doorway stood Spike Cahill and Dell Bowen, guns in hand, while behind them were Bert Roddy, Dave Morgan, and Red Eller.

'Gotcha, Lane!' snapped Bowen.

But before any one else made a move, Rex flung himself against the door, crashing it shut in the faces of the cowboys. Then he darted out of the room, and a moment later they heard the crash of glass, as he went out through a window.

One of the cowboys yelled a warning, and they went pounding around the house, while Nan and her father stood there, looking foolishly at each other. Then the old man ran through the living-room and

barred the front door, picking up his Winchester on the way back.

They could hear the cowboys yelling at each other, as they crashed through the brush, searching for the man they believed to be Paul Lane. Nan ran to a window and looked out. The chase had taken the men quite a distance from the ranch-house, but it would be only a matter of minutes until they would find Rex.

'I reckon I'll slide out for a while, Nan,' said the old man coldly. 'Looks like my best chance.'

He kissed her quickly, ran out, mounted one of the horses, and rode swiftly down past the stable. Nan heard several shots fired, and her heart sank. Had they shot Rex Morgan, she wondered?

She unbarred the door and went out on the porch, but could not see anybody. Acting on the impulse of the moment, she ran into the yard, climbed on a tall bay horse and raced away from the ranch, heading for Cañonville.

It is doubtful if Rex could have explained just why he slammed the door shut and then dived head-first through that window. It was the same window that Long Lane had used as an exit, but Rex did not wait to open it. He struck on his hands and knees in a shower of broken glass, splintered window frame, fairly bounced to his feet, and ran as fast as possible for the fringe of brush.

But one of the men had seen him, and that was only a glimpse. But it had been sufficient to send them all on his trail. He ran through the heavy cover, tearing his clothes on the mesquite, scratching his face and hands on the clinging thorns, but going ahead in spite of it all.

He could hear his pursuers now. They were unable to travel any faster than he, but they were probably in better physical condition. He tripped and fell heavily, staying down long enough to let two cowboys pass within twenty feet of him.

Then he got to his feet and struck off at an angle, only to be cut off by another cowboy, who yelled breathlessly and then fell flat on the brush. Rex had seen him fall, and it struck him as very funny, but he did not have enough breath left to laugh.

He changed his course, which took him to an open space in the brush, where he stopped for a moment to try and get his bearings. And almost at the same moment he heard a bullet scream past his ear, and from on the slope of a hill came the pop of a revolver.

Another bullet plucked at the sleeve of his shirt, and the third one struck a rock behind him and went *zeeing* off through the brush.

'Stop shootin', you damn fool!' yelled a voice. 'That ain't old man Lane; that's the crazy jigger!'

Then it seemed to Rex that cowboys came smash-

ing through the brush from every direction. He did not move, as they came up to him. It seemed that they were all swearing at him. Spike Cahill faced him, breathing heavily, purple from the hard run.

'So you're the jigger who busted through the winder, eh?' snarled Spike. 'What was the big idea?'

Rex was too short of breath to even answer a question. He grinned at Spike, and Spike knocked him flat on his back with a right-hand punch.

'Don't do that, Spike,' said Bowen. 'This damn ginny is crazy.'

'Crazy, hell!' gritted Spike. 'He led us out here to give that dirty murderer a chance to fade out. Git up, you damn lizard!'

Rex got slowly to his feet, his lips red with blood. There were tears in his eyes, and they thought he was crying because he was hurt. Spike grasped him by the left arm, sinking his fingers deep.

'Do yuh know what yuh done, yuh ignorant pup?' rasped Spike. He yanked roughly on Rex's arm.

Splat!

With no preliminary movement Rex uppercut Spike with his right fist, and Spike landed on his haunches. The knockout was so complete that,

after a moment, Spike sagged sideways and sprawled flat on his face.

Rex stepped back, rubbing his knuckles on his thigh.

'Bat him over the head with a gun,' advised Dave Morgan.

'No, yuh don't!' snapped Dell Bowen. 'Spike got what was comin' to him. This poor fool ain't got brains enough to fool us intentionally. He likely got scared and took to the window. And we didn't have sense enough to leave somebody at the house to see that it wasn't a trick.'

Spike rolled over and sat up. He was still hazy and Red Eller helped him to his feet.

'Wh-what hit me?' he asked weakly.

'The loon-a-tick,' grinned Red.

'This?' Spike pointed at Rex.

'That,' said Dell coldly, 'Yuh earned it, Spike.'

'Well, for God's sake!'

The knockout had taken the fight all out of Spike. He looked at Rex gloomily and shook his head.

'Well, we might as well go back and get the horses,' said Dave Morgan. 'It's all off for to-day.'

Ignoring Rex, they headed back to the ranch-house, with him following. And it was there that Dave Morgan and Spike Cahill staged a swearing contest. Both of their horses were missing.

For several moments the air was blue with pro-

fanity. Dell Bowen went through the house, but could find no one.

'The old man took one and the girl took the other,' he said.

'I've got a good notion to punch the head off that damn tenderfoot,' growled Dave Morgan.

'Go ahead, Davie,' urged Spike. 'Hit him for me.'

'No,' said Bowen firmly. 'He has nothin' to do with it. Hittin' him won't correct our mistakes.'

'Would you mind telling me what it is all about?' asked Rex.

The cowboys stared at him.

'Old man Lane murdered Peter Morgan,' said Bowen.

'When?'

'How in hell do we know?'

'Where?'

'Don't know that either.'

Rex spat out a little blood and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'What do you know?' he asked.

'A-a-aw, hell!' snorted Spike. 'Let's go.'

They mounted double on two of the horses, and Rex watched them spur away from the ranch. He washed his face in cold water and went through the house, looking for Nan. He didn't understand why she should leave the ranch, but she was not there.

He looked at himself in a cracked mirror, and the reflection was somewhat of a shock. He saw a pair of swollen lips, a discolored eye and numerous scratches across a face which was badly in need of a shave.

'I prefer civilization,' he said, quoting the ticket agent. 'With a face like that and a head all bandaged, I doubt if civilization would accept me. Still, I am alive; and that is something to be thankful for. I have been in a runaway over a dangerous grade, thrown from a wrecked stage, beaten over the head, helped dispose of a murdered man, dived through a window, been shot at, and knocked down. What next, I wonder? Perhaps I had better search for a razor and at least put up an appearance of civilization, even if it might be out of place in this country.'

CHAPTER IX

'KIND OF A MISFIT'

Hashknife and Sleepy were standing in front of the hotel when Nan Lane rode in to Cañonville. Her horse was lathered to the ears, and almost fell with her in front of them, but she yanked him up and headed for the sheriff's office.

'Little Miss Somebody's in a hell of a hurry,' observed Sleepy.

'Y'betcha,' agreed Hashknife. 'Come to visit the sheriff, too. Let's see what's all the hurry about.'

They strode down to the office, where they found Nan telling Lem and Noah what had happened at the ranch.

'But what was it all about?' asked Lem. 'Doggone it, Nan, don'tcha know what they wanted?'

Nan clung to the back of a chair, weary from her wild ride over the Coyote Cañon grades.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Rex slammed the door in their faces before they had time to tell, I suppose. Then he ran in through my room and fell through the window. I — I guess they thought it was my father; so they took out after him.

'Dad didn't know what it was all about, but

he decided to keep away until he could find out; so he took one of their horses and I — I took another.'

'And all them jiggers went huntin' young Morgan, eh?' grinned Noah. 'I'll betcha they ruin him before they're through.'

Lem frowned reflectively, wondering what to do. Then he stepped over to his desk, opened a drawer and took out Peter Morgan's six-shooter, which he held out to Nan.

'Didja ever see that gun before?' he asked.

Nan looked at it, knowing down in her heart that it was the gun Lem had picked up in the corral, but at that time she had paid no attention to the general appearance of the gun.

'I don't believe I have,' she replied calmly.

Lem tossed it back in the drawer, as though dismissing it from the conversation.

'I reckon we better ride up thataway and see what's what,' he said slowly, and turned to Hashknife. 'Want to go along?'

'Like to,' nodded Hashknife. 'But our broncs are so sore-footed that ——'

'Plenty broncs,' said Noah quickly. 'I'll get yuh a couple. C'mon.'

When the three men were gone, Lem turned to Nan, who was standing beside the doorway, looking out at the street.

'Was that *all* yuh knowed about it, Nan?' he asked.

'All?' She turned her head quickly.

'Yeah. Yuh didn't know why they came after yore father?'

She shook her head and looked back at the street.

'Yuh knew I found Peter Morgan's gun in yore corral this mornin', didn't yuh, Nan?'

'I saw you pick up a gun, Lem.'

'Yuh didn't know whose gun it was?'

'How would I know?' she parried.

'It's got his initials on it.'

'Has it? He must have lost it in our corral.'

'Looks like it,' sighed Lem. 'Hear anythin' of yore brother?'

Nan shook her head. 'Anyway,' she said, 'you couldn't expect me to answer that, could you, Lem?'

'I'm yore friend.'

'And sheriff of this county.'

'Yeah, I reckon that's right.'

'Who are those two strange cowboys, Lem?'

'Hartley and Stevens. The tall one is Hartley.'

'He has fine eyes, hasn't he?'

'Never noticed. His brother used to work with Noah. But what is fine about his eyes?'

'The way they look at you, Lem.'

The sheriff laughed softly. 'You're a pretty girl, Nan.'

'But they didn't look at me that way.'

'I pass,' sighed Lem.

The three men were coming from the livery-stable with their horses.

'Mebby you better stay here in town until this thing is over,' suggested Lem.

'Not me,' declared Nan. 'I'm going back with you, if that stolen horse is able to make the trip.'

'Looks like Dave Morgan's bronc,' grinned Lem. 'He'll want me to arrest yuh for stealin' his horse, I suppose. Mebby I will, Nan; who knows?'

'I — I hope you won't, Lem,' she said seriously.

'Well, I won't. And if he swears out a warrant, I'll give yuh plenty of room for a getaway.'

Lem introduced Hashknife and Sleepy to Nan, and they all rode out of town together. Nan was worried over what might happen to Rex Morgan, but Lem refused to hurry.

'Yore horse is all tired out, and, anyway, they won't hurt young Morgan,' he said. 'Them boys will find out their mistake. One of 'em might take a punch at him for foxin' 'em thataway.'

'Oh, I hope not,' said Nan. 'His head is badly hurt, and he isn't very strong, anyway.'

'Did he pull that winder stunt to give yore dad a chance to git away?' asked Noah.

'I don't know. Perhaps he was so frightened at the sight of those guns that he went right out

through the window. You see,' turning to Hashknife, 'he isn't used to this kind of a country, Mr. Hartley.'

'I can imagine how he'd feel,' smiled Hashknife. 'What do yuh know about young Morgan, Miss Lane?'

'Only what he has told us.'

'Kind of a misfit,' growled Lem. 'Ort to be back in the city where he belongs.'

Noah winked at Hashknife meaningly, and Nan saw it. She blushed and turned her head away. It was nearly dark when they reached the Lane ranch. Rex was sitting on the front porch, with Paul Lane's double-barrel shotgun across his lap. In the dim light he recognized Nan, and came out to meet them.

'What did they do to you, Rex?' she asked anxiously.

'Not much,' cheerfully. 'One of the boys knocked me down, and then I knocked him down.'

'The hell yuh did!' blurted Lem, swinging down from his saddle. 'Which one was it, Morgan?'

'I think it was Mr. Cahill.'

'Spike Cahill!' exploded Noah. 'You knocked him down?'

'Yes. It was quite a while before he recovered.'

'Say-a-a! C'mere and shake hands.'

Rex shook hands with Noah, who doubled up with mirth.

'Is Spike Cahill a fighter?' asked Hashknife.

'Not necessarily; but he's shore belligerent. Wish t' gosh I'd 'a' seen it. That'll stigmatize Spike to his dyin' day.'

'C'mere, Morgan,' ordered Lem severely. 'What was it all about? Didn't they tell yuh?'

'Yes, they told me. I tried to find out how they knew so much about it — the evidence, you know — but they ——'

'The evidence of what?'

'That Mr. Lane had killed Peter Morgan.'

'F'r God's sake! Is Peter Morgan dead?'

'I would gather from their remarks that he is, Mr. Sheeley. I asked them where he was killed and when he was killed, but none of them were able to answer my questions. They rode away without molesting me further.'

'Did Spike Cahill knock you down, Rex?' asked Nan.

'Oh, certainly. I suppose he was excited. In fact, one of them fired three shots at me, and one went through my sleeve, but no harm was done. But for fear that some of them might come back, I armed myself.'

Sleepy picked up the shotgun and opened it.

'This gun is empty,' he said.

'Didn't you load it, Rex?' asked Nan.

'No. You see, I didn't know ——'

'And there yuh are!' snorted Lem. 'Hell's bells! We've got to get to town and find out about this. Noah, you stay here and help hold down the ranch. We can't leave Nan alone with that damn idiot.'

'Suppose you stay here, too, Sleepy,' suggested Hashknife.

'Suits me.'

'I thought it would,' meaningly.

Lem and Hashknife mounted and headed for Mesa City, riding knee-to-knee.

'What was it about that gun in the corral?' queried Hashknife, as they swung back on the main road.

'I dunno, Hartley. Gad, it looks bad for Lane. Of course, we'll have to get the details before we can figure on anythin'. I feel awful sorry for that girl. But she's plumb game, she is. Imagine a girl actin' like her, when her father and brother are both accused of murder, and both hidin' in the hills.'

'She's shore cool, sheriff. It takes cool folks to live in this kind of a country.'

'In more ways than one, Hartley.'

They rode into Mesa City and tied their horses at the Oasis saloon, where they found Dave Morgan, Cal Dickenson, Spike Cahill, Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs, and Red Eller, all more or less drunk. They looked the sheriff over coldly.

'What's been goin' on, boys?' asked the sheriff.

'A-a-a-a plenty!' snorted Dave Morgan. 'Didn't yuh hear about it?'

'I haven't heard much, Dave. Nan Lane came to Cañonville after me, but she didn't know what it was all about. Young Morgan said yuh accused Paul Lane of murderin' Peter Morgan. It's a damn wonder that some of yuh couldn't have come after me in the first place. Now, the soberest one of yuh tell me what happened to-day. No, don't all talk at once. Spike, you tell it.'

'I can damn soon tell yuh, Lem,' declared Spike. 'When we got up this mornin', Peter Morgan was gone. He'd saddled up and pulled out before breakfast. Me and Bert Roddy came to town. Well, you met us here, Lem. We went back to the ranch, and it wasn't so very long after that when here comes Peter Morgan's horse, and on his back is Pete Morgan, tied on — dead as a doornail.

'He'd been hit over the head with somethin', and his gun was gone. There was blood on the horse's shoulder, and we thought the horse had been shot, but it was Pete's blood. And the horse came from down toward the Lane ranch. You know that Pete and old Lane had a fight yesterday here in town, and Lane said he'd kill the first one of the 6 × 6 that ever came on his ranch.'

'Where's Pete's body now, Spike?'

'Out at the ranch.'

'And nobody thought to notify me, eh? I suppose the sheriff and the coroner ——'

'We didn't need yore help,' said Dave Morgan. 'You haven't even tried to find young Lane. Things like this don't require a sheriff, Lem.'

'Things like this require a little brains and horse-sense,' retorted Lem. 'And there ain't a damn one of you fellers that qualify. You was jist smart enough to send old man Lane into the hills.'

'If it hadn't been for that fool kid ——'

'Smart, I'd call it,' said Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs.

'Hello, Napoleon,' smiled Lem. 'How come you in town?'

'He's scared to stay on the ranch with a corpse,' laughed Spike. 'Wouldn't even stay there along with Dell Bowen and Bert Roddy.'

'All right,' grunted Briggs. 'I don't crave no dead folks. Every person's got a hobby. Mine's to keep a long ways ahead of the dead.'

'You got a rig we can take the body to Cañonville in?' asked Lem.

'Shore,' nodded Spike. 'Got a hack.'

'All right; c'mon and drive it.'

'Aw, hell, Lem! I'm all ——'

'You're deputized, Spike.'

'I hoped yuh wouldn't do that, Lem.'

'Well, it's done — c'mon.'

'You have to come back through here, don'tcha?' asked Hashknife. 'All right; I'll stay here until yuh come back.'

'You got a hobby like mine?' asked Briggs.

'Somethin' like it.'

'Good! I'll buy a drink.'

Dave Morgan, Cal Dickenson, and Spike Cahill went with the sheriff, while Hashknife stayed with Napoleon and Red Eller. The Oasis was not busy. Only on Saturday and Sunday was the trade heavy. The bartender was a portly sort of person, collarless, moist of skin, with the proverbial 'spit-curl' over his left eye and an odor of perfume.

'It sure was a blow to this country when Peter Morgan died,' he said mournfully. 'Grand man; big man. In fact, he was the biggest ——'

'Yore loop's around yore feet,' warned Briggs. 'All you know about him is seein' him once or twice a week.'

'I worked for him, didn't I?'

'Yea-a-ah, yuh did and yuh do. But I knowed him better than you ever could. I've filled his belly with food for years, and I shore know him from his chilblains to his dandruff. And he wasn't a big man. He was pretty much of a damn fool in lotsa ways.'

'Just what ways?' asked the bartender.

'Lotsa ways. Say! He shore got popped over the head awful hard. I got one look at him, and that was s'ficient f'r me. I says t' myself, "Pete, you're a gonner." And he was, too.'

'Who was there when he came, Briggs?'

'Oh, me and Spike and Bert and Dell and Dave Morgan. It shore hit Dave awful hard. Him and Peter never was real friendly, but they was cousins.'

'Who gets the 6 × 6 ranch?' asked Hashknife.

'Prob'ly lotsa folks are wonderin' about that,' said Briggs slowly. 'Dave looks like the lee-gitimate heir, unless old Pete made out a will. That'll all be found out later on, I reckon. Pete wasn't much of a hand to monkey with lawyers. Kinda wanted t' be his own law.'

'Dave'll probably git the Oasis saloon, too,' said the bartender. 'Mebby he'll get his fill of liquor and poker.'

'Dave's all right,' defended Red Eller.

'I'm not sayin' a word agin' him, Red. Let's all have a drink.'

They accepted the drink, and Hashknife turned to Red.

'Were you at the Lane ranch this mornin'?'

'I shore was,' grinned Red. 'That tenderfoot shore foxed us a-plenty. We was so anxious to git our hands on old man Lane that we plumb forgot he

might stampede; and when we heard that winder go smash, we busted our legs tryin' to head him off.

'And he shore led us a merry chase. By the time we did catch him, Spike was awful sore. He busted the kid flat with a punch on the jaw, but the kid got up, kinda white, spittin' blood. And when Spike grabbed him by the arm, the kid knocked Spike plumb cold with an uppercut to the jaw.

'Oh, it was a complete knockout. That tenderfoot kid may be crazy, but don't never let anybody tell yuh he can't hit. He took all the fight out of Spike. Why, he hit Spike so damn hard that Spike got on his horse from the wrong side.'

'Is he any relation to Dave Morgan?' asked Hashknife.

'Na-a-aaw!'

'What's he doin' in this country?'

'*Quien sabe?* He ain't been here long enough for anybody to find out. Hello, Bunty.'

Bunty Smith came over to the bar, glanced quickly at Hashknife, and returned Red's greeting. Red turned to Hashknife.

'I dunno yore name, pardner; but whatever it is, this is Bunty Smith, one of the stage drivers. Bunty's the owner of the stage line, and drives every other day.'

'My name's Hartley,' smiled Hashknife, and shook hands with Bunty.

'We was jist talkin' about young Morgan,' said Red.

'Oh, that damn fool! Is he still alive?'

'Live enough to knock Spike Cahill out.'

'You love to lie, don'tcha, Red?'

Red explained what had happened that morning, and Bunty apologized by buying a drink.

'That tenderfoot shore had me moppin' my brow,' laughed Bunty. 'I still think he's loco. Hartley, did yuh hear about him headin' for town on one of my horses, and fallin' off on his head in front of the Lane ranch-house?'

'He said somebody hit him, didn't he?'

'Shore he did. Alibi for fallin' off.'

'I never thought of that,' laughed Red. 'By golly, and I thought it was a mystery.'

'It's like the usual mystery,' smiled Hashknife.

'Do you like mishteries?' asked Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs, who was not carrying his liquor so well.

'I don't,' replied Hashknife.

'Shame here. I like romansh. Didja ever read "Lef' at the Altar"? Great book. You don't happen to know where I c'n fin' the rest of it, do yuh?'

'The rest of the book?'

'Shertinly. Mine's been docked. Right on the las' line it says, "Lord Mort'mer flung the heavy

draperies ashide with the point of his sh-sh-shword, and there stood ——" And that's the end of it. I've 'magined my own endin' for the shtory, but it ain't so good. But she's a dinger up to where she skips off into space.'

'Sheriff ain't caught young Lane yet, has he?' asked Bunty.

'Na-a-aw, and he never will,' flared Red. 'I think he's stuck on that girl.'

'Shows damn good taste,' said Briggs. 'I've only sheen her once, but I was shober enough to r'lize that she was pretty nice for to gaze upon.'

'The sheriff,' said Hashknife, anxious to switch the subject away from Nan, 'seems of the opinion that this young Lane shot in self-defense.'

'All right,' said Red, ready for an argument. 'If he did, why did he take Ben's horse and gun? I'm not tryin' to stick him for killin' Ben, if he had to do it; but he took the horse and the gun.'

'Yes, that looks bad. But he was drunk.'

'Not too drunk, Hartley. Remember he shot straight.'

'That's true. And what evidence have yuh that old man Lane killed Peter Morgan?'

'None,' said Red honestly. 'Lane swore he'd kill him, if he came to his ranch. Peter Morgan is dead, and his body came from toward the Lane ranch. That's all we've got.'

'Lane was heard to say that he'd kill any of the 6 × 6 that came to his ranch, wasn't he?'

'He shore was.'

'And if Peter Morgan went there, after that warnin', wasn't he expectin' to kill or be killed?'

'I dunno what he thought. But that can't be made out as self-defense, Hartley. If Lane killed him, why didn't Lane report it to the sheriff? I mean, if it was self-defense, Lane could clear himself, I reckon.'

'Could he, Eller? With his own son hidin' out from the law? With the feeling against nesters? Do yuh think he could clear himself? Remember, Peter Morgan was a big man around here — Lane the smallest. Look at it from Lane's angle.'

Red gazed moodily at his empty glass.

'I see what yuh mean, Hartley. I never did put myself in Lane's place — until now.'

'The law,' said the bartender wisely, 'is supposed to play square with yuh.'

'It very often does,' nodded Hashknife. 'In case they decide yuh deserve hangin', they'll furnish the rope.'

Red squinted at Hashknife, a half-grin on his lips.

'You ain't very strong for the law, are yuh, pardner?'

'Not for the law — but for justice.'

'There's a difference,' agreed Red. 'Well, I reckon I better take Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs over to the hotel and put him to bed.'

'Lemme shee yuh do it,' urged Briggs.

'Oh, I can do it all right,' declared Red.

He grasped Briggs by the collar and one sleeve and was hustling him to the doorway, when Rex Morgan came in. He was hatless, dirty, one shirt-sleeve almost torn off at the shoulder. For several moments he stood there, breathing heavily, before he could speak.

'Get a doctor!' he blurted. 'Mr. Evans has been shot.'

Red released Briggs, who stumbled against the wall and fell in a heap, swearing drunkenly.

'Who do yuh mean?' demanded Red. 'Noah Evans, the deputy sheriff?'

Rex nodded painfully. 'At the Lane home. He — he went out on the porch and somebody shot him.'

'How badly is he hurt?' asked Hashknife.

'Through the shoulder. Mr. Stevens says it is quite bad. They made me ride here after the doctor and I fell off. But' — he tried to grin — 'I held to the lines, and got on again.'

'I'll get the doctor,' said Red, and ran from the saloon.

'You look as though yuh needed a drink,' said the

bartender, pouring out a stiff drink of whiskey. 'Throw that into yuh, kid.'

Rex shook his head. 'I — I never did drink anything.'

'You prob'ly never needed it before.'

'Do yuh good,' nodded Hashknife. 'Better mix a little water in it, if yore neck is tender.'

Rex choked over the drink and his eyes filled with tears. Mesa City liquor was powerful stuff, and after a few moments the effects of the drink brought a pleasant glow to its owner.

'Feelin' better?' asked the bartender.

'Wonderful. What was in it?'

'God only knows. For some men it's full of fights; for some it's full of songs. Didn't yuh ever take a shot of hooch before?'

'No, sir.'

'I reckon you've been raised by hand,' sighed the bartender. 'Have another?'

Rex did. Hashknife was standing beside the doorway, listening for Red Eller to come back with the doctor, and he turned to watch Rex take his second drink.

'Are you the feller who knocked out Spike Cahill?' asked the bartender.

'Yes,' choked Rex. 'Ah-h-h-h!'

'They tell me you're a fighter.'

'I — I do very nicely, thank you.'

'My Gawd!' grunted the bartender. 'You do nicely, eh?'

Hashknife studied the flushed face of Rex Morgan. The two drinks of powerful liquor were almost too much for the young man.

'C'mere, Morgan,' said Hashknife, and Rex came over to him, slightly unsteady on his feet.

'Just what are you doin' in this country?' asked Hashknife.

'Well —' Rex rubbed the palm of his right hand along his jaw, his eyes half-shut, as he tried to concentrate on Hashknife's question.

'Well, I don't exactly know,' he confessed. 'I'm sure I did not come here to get the things I have already received. I — I think I came out of curiosity.'

'Curiosity, eh? And how did you happen to pick on this part of the country?'

'It was a check on the Mesa City Bank, Mr. Hartley; a check which was sent to my mother. After she died I found the check.'

'A check sent from here to your mother, eh? Whose name was on that check?'

'I don't know. Queer, isn't it? The writing was so blurred, don't you see? Or perhaps the signature was not well written.'

He grinned at Hashknife foolishly. 'I feel so free of all pain,' he said slowly. 'Even my head does not pain me now. It is the first time since I woke up at

the Lane residence that my head has not hurt me.'

'You're drunk,' said Hashknife shortly. A horse and buggy were coming down the street, and turned in at the front of the saloon.

It was Red Eller and the doctor.

'Better let Morgan ride with the doctor,' suggested Hashknife. 'I'll go back to the Lane place, and as soon as the sheriff shows up, you can tell him what happened, Eller.'

'All right. It'll give me a chance to put Briggs to bed.'

'I'm going to ride a horsh,' declared Rex.

'You're goin' to ride on a buggy seat,' replied Hashknife. 'Get in with the doctor and I'll lead yore horse.'

It was possibly an hour later when the sheriff came back to Mesa City with the body of Peter Morgan. Dave Morgan and Spike Cahill came back with him, and when they stopped at the Oasis saloon, Red Eller told them what had happened at the Lane ranch.

Joe Cave, Bunty Smith's driver, had joined Red at the Oasis, and now they all headed for the Lane ranch, taking the body of Peter Morgan along with them. Red knew nothing about the shooting, except what Rex had told them.

'That's what yuh get for leavin' yore deputy at

that place,' declared Dave Morgan. 'Old Lane probably mistook Noah for one of the 6 × 6 outfit.'

'Don't talk too damn much, until yuh know what it is all about,' replied Lem, and Dave subsided.

They were unable to travel very fast over the old road, for fear of jolting the corpse out of the hack, but they eventually drew up at the Lane ranch. Hashknife met them at the porch.

'Evans is pretty badly hurt, but conscious,' he told them. 'The doctor thinks he might stand the ride to Cañonville, where we can ship him to a hospital, if he needs one; and this ain't such a good place for him.'

They shoved in past Hashknife and found Noah on a bed in the living-room, with the doctor bandaging him with yards of cloth, while Nan stood beside the bed, assisting him.

Noah tried to smile, but it was an effort.

'Don't ask him to talk,' warned the doctor. 'He's been hurt badly. Have you something we can take him to town in, boys?'

'Got a hack,' said Lem. 'But we've got a dead man in the bottom of it. Who knows what happened here?'

'Nobody,' said Sleepy quickly. 'Noah went out on the front porch, just kinda lookin' around, and

somebody potted him from the brush. We heard the shot, and Noah came clear back in here before he fell. By the time we got over the shock and got outside, there wasn't anybody in sight. Anyway, it was too dark to see. I reckon they saw him against the light of the doorway.'

'Where was the girl and that young feller?' asked Dave Morgan.

'Right in here with me.'

'Who are you?' asked Joe Cave.

Sleepy considered Joe gravely.

'You ought to study law, pardner. I think I'll object to that, as bein' a leadin' question, irrelevant, immaterial, and having no bearing upon the case.'

'Yuh don't say!' snorted Joe.

'Keep out of this, Joe,' growled Dave Morgan.

'Well, damn it, I jist asked a question.'

'And didn't get it answered.'

'Well, what about it?' queried Lem. 'How are we goin' to take Noah to town? He can't stand ridin' in a lumber wagon. We might leave the corpse here ——'

'Like hell yuh will!' snapped Dave Morgan.

'What harm would it do?' asked Hashknife. 'Peter Morgan is dead. There's nothing yuh can do for him, except to bury him. Bein' a relative, I know how yuh feel, but yuh can't let sentiment

interfere in a case of this kind. We've got to get Evans to a hospital; sabe?'

'Since when did you start runnin' this country?' demanded Dave Morgan hotly.

'Since about a minute ago, Morgan. Sleepy, you and Eller fix a place in the stable where we can leave a corpse until mornin'. See if yuh can't find an old piece of canvas or ——'

'In the stable, eh?' grunted Dave. 'By Gad, you ——'

'In the stable!' snapped Lem. 'Now, shut up, Dave. I'll send a livery rig out after the body tonight, if that will ease yore mind any.'

Dave shrugged his shoulders and turned away, muttering under his breath, while the boys prepared a place for Peter Morgan. One of the boys piled some hay in the bottom of the hack, and they fixed Noah up as comfortably as possible. There had been no hint of who had shot him, but Nan knew what they were thinking.

When they were ready to leave for Cañonville, Lem took Hashknife aside and asked him to stay at the ranch.

'You and Sleepy stay, will yuh, Hartley? I'm darned if I want Nan to be here alone with that fool kid.'

'Sure, we'll stay. Intended to all the time. What's yore idea of it all, sheriff?'

Lem shook his head. 'I dunno; we'll talk later.'

Nan had kept her nerve well, but after they had gone, she sat down and cried. Rex sat on the edge of the bed, looking at her gloomily. His head was aching again, and the bandage had assumed a rakish angle over his left ear.

Hashknife tilted back against the wall in a chair and smoked a cigarette, while Sleepy sat on his heels against the wall, also smoking. Finally Nan got to her feet and shook back her hair.

'No use being a little fool,' she choked. 'Crying won't make anything right. I — I'm going to get us some supper.'

She stopped in the doorway and looked back at Hashknife.

'I know what they're saying. They think my father shot Noah Evans, don't they?'

'By mistake — I suppose,' replied Hashknife.

'Thinking he was one of the 6 × 6?'

'Probably.'

She came back closer to him. 'Do you think so?'

'I'm kinda funny,' he smiled at her. 'They've got to prove anythin' — and then I only believe half of it. Yuh see, I don't know yore father, Miss Lane.'

'I see. What did the sheriff say about it?'

'He didn't say. That's one thing I like about him.'

'But I know he suspects.'

Nan was thinking of the gun in the corral. After a moment she turned and went into the kitchen, where she began preparing a meal.

Hashknife studied the attitude of Rex Morgan, who might well have been posing for a statue of Despondency.

'How do yuh like this country, Morgan?' he asked.

Rex looked up slowly and sighed audibly.

'I think I prefer civilization, Mr. Hartley.'

'You are seeing life in the rough, Morgan,' grinning.

'Seeing? Horned frawgs, as Mr. Bunty Smith says — I'm living it.'

CHAPTER X

LYNCH LAWYERS

THE following morning, shortly after daylight, Lem Sheeley and Joe Cave arrived at the ranch with the hack from the 6 × 6 and a top-buggy. They were going to take Peter Morgan's body to Cañonville in the hack, and Lem brought the top-buggy to take Nan to the inquest — or rather the double inquest.

This had been the date set for the inquest over the body of Ben Leach; so they were going to hold one over Peter Morgan on the same day. Lem had appointed Joe Cave to act as his deputy while Noah Evans was out of commission.

'They know Nan was here at the ranch when her brother came from Mesa City, and heard what he said about fixin' one of the 6 × 6 outfit,' explained Lem. 'Me and Noah heard it; but they want her testimony.'

Nan agreed to go, and while she was getting ready, Hashknife took Lem aside and questioned him about the gun he found in the corral.

'Are you goin' to offer that as evidence?' asked Hashknife.

'I'm kinda stuck about that,' said Lem. 'I hate

to do it, and still I figure I ought to, Hashknife. It'll hang Lane as sure as hell.'

'They'll have to catch him first.'

'Yeah, I know; but I'll catch him. I wasn't goin' to do a thing until the coroner's jury decides; but if they say it was murder and name the murderer — what can I do? I'm jist an instrument, Hashknife.'

'I know, Lem. How's Noah this mornin'?'

'Crazy as a shepherd. The doctor was with him all night, and he says Noah's got a fightin' chance. That ride last night didn't do him a bit of good, and the doctor says we can't take a chance on shippin' him to a hospital.

'The folks down in Cañonville want to go right out and hang a rope on old man Lane and his son. They figure one of 'em mistook Noah for somebody from the 6 × 6.'

Sleepy and Joe Cave were putting the body into the hack, while Rex stood against the side of the stable, watching them.

'What do yuh think of that young Morgan?' asked Lem.

Hashknife grinned slowly. 'He's so damned ignorant that he might do somethin' smart. I figure he's been raised in a hothouse, Lem. Still, he's got a sense of humor, and he ain't all fool. Just between me and you, he's got somethin' on his mind.'

'Mebby it's the wallop he got on the head, Hashknife.'

'Mebby.'

Nan had come out to the buggy; so the two men sauntered toward the front of the house.

'We'll stay here at the ranch,' said Hashknife, as Nan held out her hand to him.

'Thank you,' she said simply.

'And when they put yuh on the witness stand,' said Hashknife slowly, 'don't offer anythin'. If yuh don't feel like answerin' a question, jist say yuh don't know. The law never hung anybody for not rememberin'.'

'That's fine advice to a witness, right in my presence,' grinned Lem, as he untied the horse.

'I shall follow that advice,' said Nan firmly. 'Good-bye, Mr. Hartley. Take good care of Rex.'

'Can't he take care of himself?' growled Lem.

'I don't think so, Lem. He needs somebody to look after him.'

'He ort to get a keeper, or a nurse.'

The two vehicles rolled away up the dusty road, leaving Hashknife and Rex together at the front porch. Sleepy had gone to the rear of the house to wash his hands.

'So that's the opinion she has of me, is it?' queried Rex wearily. 'Need some one to look after me.'

'I don't think she meant it exactly that way,' smiled Hashknife.

'Oh, I guess she's right as far as that goes, Mr. Hartley; I guess I do need some one to look after me. I — I don't know anything.'

'Uh-huh?' Hashknife considered Rex gravely. 'Morgan, if it was rainin' real hard right now, what would you do?'

'Why — er — go in the house, I suppose.'

'I reckon you've got as much sense as the rest of us, but yuh lack in experience.'

Sleepy came around the house and they all sat down in the shade of the porch. Rex wanted to know what an inquest meant, and Hashknife explained all about it.

'And if that jury decides that Mr. Morgan was killed by Mr. Lane, they will hang Mr. Lane?'

'Well, not immediately,' said Hashknife. 'They will have to capture Mr. Lane and give him a fair trial.'

'Have they any evidence that Mr. Lane killed him?'

'Only that Lane hated Morgan and threatened to shoot any of his outfit that might come over here; and the fact that the horse bearing the body of Morgan came from this direction. Of course those are merely circumstantial facts. And there's the fact that the sheriff found Peter Morgan's gun

in the corral down there.' Hashknife was watching Rex closely when he brought out the last evidence, and he saw Rex change color quickly, shutting his lips tightly. And he did not look at Hashknife when Hashknife added:

'That last bit of evidence might hang him.'

'I don't know anything about it,' said Rex slowly.

'Of course not.'

'I — I didn't see the gun.'

'Prob'ly not. The sheriff found it. He said that you fainted in the corral.'

'Oh, yes!' Rex tried to laugh. 'We — Miss Lane and — we heard a chicken crowing, and she made up a little poem about eggs for breakfast; so we went to find the egg, you see. Yes, I fainted. Foolish thing to do, wasn't it?'

'Mebby not. But neither of you saw the gun, eh?'

'Oh, no. We were excited and ——' Rex stopped quickly.

'Excited over what?' asked Hashknife quickly.

Rex shut his lips tightly and looked away for several moments. Finally he sighed softly.

'Eggs,' he said simply.

'Excited over eggs?'

'Yes. Oh, it doesn't require much to excite me.'

'Uh-huh.'

Hashknife and Sleepy exchanged glances. Hashknife was sure that Rex Morgan knew more than he was willing to tell. It was evident that this young tenderfoot was protecting Nan Lane — and Hashknife admired him for it.

'Do you intend to stay in this country?' asked Sleepy.

'Do you mean always?' Rex shook his head slowly. 'No, I — well, I don't really know. Do you know, everything has been more or less like a dream since my mother died. I have been jerked around so badly that I hardly know what to do next. I realize that I shouldn't be here, sponging, I believe you'd call it, on the Lane family. But I just simply don't know what to do.'

'Didn't you ever have a job?' asked Hashknife.

Rex pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment.

'Yes, I did. I believe it lasted less than an hour. Mr. Weed, a grocer, employed me as a driver for one of his delivery wagons, but I tried to outrun a fire department.'

'And didn't make it?' smiled Hashknife.

'Oh, but I did! But when I was forced to stop, I — I threw out the anchor, and ——'

'Uh-huh!' snorted Sleepy. 'That's what Bunty Smith said.'

'Threw out the anchor?' queried Hashknife.

'That is what one of the men called it. It was a

heavy weight which they have fastened to the horses, and when you make a delivery you leave it on the ground. It prevents the horses from running away, don't you see?'

Hashknife laughed softly. 'I know what yuh mean, kid.'

'Well, when I threw it off, I believe it wrapped around a pole. At any rate, we stopped so suddenly that I entered a store on the back of my neck, and by the time I had recovered, I had lost my position.'

'And that's the only job yuh ever had?'

'The only one.'

'How old are yuh, Morgan?'

'Twenty.'

'Yore folks have plenty of money?'

'I didn't have folks — just a mother.'

'Yea-a-ah?' Hashknife leaned back, resting his shoulders against the wall, and began rolling a cigarette.

'What became of yore father?' asked Sleepy.

Rex shook his head. 'I never knew him. In fact, I never heard his name mentioned.'

And while Hashknife and Sleepy lounged in the shade and listened closely, Rex Morgan told them of his life. He did not condemn his mother for the way she had raised him.

'Mebby she wanted yuh to be a preacher,' suggested Sleepy. 'Was she very religious?'

'No; not very. In fact, she seldom went to church.'

'And you say that check was on the Mesa City Bank?' asked Hashknife.

'Yes. That was why I came here; trying to find out who sent her that money. Perhaps they might tell me more.'

'Did yore mother ever mention Mesa City?'

'No.'

'Well, that's shore a queer deal, Morgan. Even if you never find out anythin', I think you came to the right country. It'll make a man out of yuh. Get a job. Even if yuh don't know anythin', take the job and learn. Make good out here. Folks are rough out here, but if yuh make good with them, they'll stand at yore back until yore belly caves in.'

'I suppose you are right, Mr. Hartley.'

'Call me Hashknife.'

'Thank you.'

'I'm Sleepy.'

Rex turned his head and glanced at Sleepy.

'Why don't you go in and lie down?' asked Rex.

Hashknife grunted so explosively that he blew his cigarette out into the yard, while Sleepy slid down on his shoulders, shaking with laughter.

'I don't understand,' said Rex blankly.

'That's what made it so damn funny,' choked

Hashknife. 'He meant that his nickname was Sleepy.'

'Oh, I knew that; but I — I didn't realize it at the time. I guess it did sound rather like a joke.'

'Rather,' chuckled Sleepy. 'But don't mind me; I'm just a bow-legged puncher, tryin' to get along in the world.'

'Morgan, you must have had quite an experience the night you arrived here,' said Hashknife.

Rex grinned slowly. 'I surely did, Hashknife. I wonder why that man struck me over the head.'

'Some of the folks,' said Hashknife slowly, 'seem to doubt that yuh got hit. They think yuh fell off the horse and hit yore head on a rock.'

'I did not!' indignantly. 'Not that I couldn't have done such a thing. You see, I had never ridden a horse before. But there is something that has bothered me, Hashknife. Just before I reached the house I went through a big gate.'

'You went through a big gate?' pondered Hashknife.

'I was obliged to get off the horse to open the gate.'

'But there is no gate here.'

'That is the queer part of it.'

'Hm-m-m-m,' Hashknife grunted softly as he rolled another cigarette. 'Went through a big gate, eh? How was it fastened?'

'I don't remember that it was fastened.'

'Uh-huh. But this was the house, eh?'

'I suppose so. It was very dark that night, and I was unable to see more than the outline of the house.'

'Are yuh shore yuh didn't dream about that gate?'

Rex frowned thoughtfully.

'Perhaps I did, Hashknife. As far as that is concerned, I might have dreamed all of it. But if you do not think I was struck on the head — look at it.'

'I saw it,' grinned Hashknife. 'That's no dream.'

'Well, that's no more true than the rest of it.'

'You ain't been to Mesa City yet, have yuh? I mean, to make any investigations about that check.'

'No; I haven't had a chance. But just as soon as possible, I shall go over there.'

It was late in the afternoon when Nan came home, accompanied by a man from the Cañonville livery-stable. Hashknife met her and they walked from the buggy to the house. She did not mention the inquests until Sleepy and Rex met them in the living-room, and the four of them sat down together.

'They asked the sheriff to arrest Walter for shooting Ben Leach,' she said bravely. 'They say, be-

cause he took Ben's horse and gun, it don't look like self-defense.

'But they say Dad murdered Peter Morgan.'

'Who testified?' asked Hashknife.

'Some boys of the 6 × 6 testified that Peter Morgan's body came on, roped to the saddle of his horse. That was all the testimony, except what was said about the fight Dad had with Peter Morgan in Mesa City, and that Dad swore he'd kill them if they came here.'

'And that's all the evidence they needed to name yore dad as the murderer?'

'That was all. They didn't ask me to testify. Lem told them about Walter coming home from Mesa City drunk, and what he said about "fixing" one of the 6 × 6 outfit. Lem tried to give his opinion of Ben Leach following Walter, but the coroner wouldn't let him talk, and they almost had a fight.'

'And will the sheriff be obliged to capture your father and brother now?' asked Rex.

Nan nodded wearily. 'I guess he will. Oh, I don't know what to do. We haven't any money to hire lawyers; nothing to fight with.'

'The court will appoint a lawyer to defend them,' said Hashknife.

'To represent them,' corrected Nan quickly. 'But of what value will he be to us? It is merely a matter of form. Oh, I know enough about the law

to know what it will mean. A cow-town jury, sitting in judgment on a nester.'

'Well,' said the optimistic Sleepy, 'they ain't got 'em in jail yet, Nan.'

'But they will have. Dad and Walter are not far away from here.'

'I'd like to have a talk with 'em before the sheriff gets his hands on 'em,' said Hashknife.

'What for?' asked Nan.

'Oh, just to talk about things. I'd like to get their version of things ahead of the rest.'

Later that day Hashknife and Sleepy talked things over from the top-pole of the corral fence.

'I tell yuh, it's no puzzle,' declared Sleepy. 'Old man Lane killed Pete Morgan, jist as sure as a Californian will lie about his climate. Of course, Pete had no business bein' here. He'd been warned to stay away — and didn't. If me and you was on a jury, we'd turn him loose — because we don't hate a nester.

'Likewise, this here Ben Leach got his needin's. Hunted for trouble, and found it. Self-defense of course; but yuh never can convince these natives that Lane didn't bushwhack Leach. Of course, Lane made a mistake in takin' the horse and gun, but he was drunk and mad.'

It was a long speech for Sleepy to make. Hashknife lifted his brows in mock astonishment.

'Yore gettin' kinda technical, ain't yuh, Sleepy?'

'Well,' confessed Sleepy, 'that's the way she looks to me. Whatsa use of stayin' around here any longer? We've got to land a couple of jobs for the winter, ain't we?'

'Did we ever quit before the last dog was hung?'

Sleepy shook his head gloomily. They had been together for quite a number of years, these two drifting cowboys. Their trails had led from the wide lands of Alberta to the Mexican border, and no matter where they were there was always a hill just beyond which beckoned them on.

Sleepy had been christened David in the little Idaho town here he was born, but it had been soon changed to his present cognomen because of the fact that, like a weasel, he seemed to sleep with both eyes open.

He and Henry Hartley had met on the old ranch which gave Henry the name of Hashknife, and together these two cowboys of the itching feet struck out for themselves. The ranges were wide and there was plenty of demand for the services of top-hand cowboys, but they did not stay long in any one place.

Fate had given Hashknife an analytical mind. In a different environment he might have been a famous detective instead of a drifting cowboy, a Nem-

esis of range crooks, where, in most cases, the six-shooter superseded the court of law.

It seemed as though Fate continually threw them into troubled places, no matter which way they traveled, until even Sleepy, prone to argument, admitted that there was little use trying to dodge the issue. Sleepy analyzed nothing. He was content to follow the lengthy Hashknife, no matter where the trail led, and to be ready for trouble at the finish.

Their remuneration had been small. In fact, they might better have been working at forty dollars a month, as far as the financial end of their partnership was concerned. Two horses, riding rigs, clothes, guns, and a few dollars were all they ever had.

'Yuh can't take anythin' with yuh,' Hashknife had often said when Sleepy remarked about their financial returns.

'The farther we go, the less chance we have of livin' to a ripe old age; so what good is the money? I'd rather give while I'm alive to see the happiness it brings. And if we had a lot of money, we wouldn't know what in hell to spend it for.'

Hashknife debated over Sleepy's résumé of the case. It was the reasonable decision, and was probably the decision of everybody who knew of the case; but Hashknife withheld his opinion because he refused to agree with the masses. To Sleepy, the

case was closed; but to Hashknife, it was just beginning to open.

'They tell me that Paul Lane is a salty old jigger,' said Sleepy thoughtfully. 'It would be like him to kill a man and send him home on his own horse. I wish I knew what Pete Morgan was doin' over here that night?'

'Evidently tryin' to "get" old man Lane, Sleepy.'

'Why?'

'There yuh are. He came alone. Why?'

'Don't ask me — I'm no mind-reader.'

'And still yuh think there's nothin' to the case?'

'I wasn't figurin' any reasons for the killin'.'

'There's got to be a reason for the killin', Sleepy. I want to know why Pete Morgan got up long before daylight, saddled his horse, and came over here — if he did come here. Of course, we've got no proof that he did except that the sheriff found his gun in the corral.'

'Guns don't fly.'

'This 'n didn't have any wings. Sleepy, didja ever see a girl with more nerve than Nan Lane? By golly, she's a dinger. Wants to cry, but won't. It's a hell of a position for her to be in, don'tcha know it. She's up there in the kitchen cookin' up a meal for us, when down in her heart she wants to lie down and cry her eyes out. If I ever get married, I hope I get her kind.'

'One that won't cry, Hashknife?'

'Sure.'

'Yuh never will, cowboy. Mebby she won't cry from ordinary causes, but jist let you put on a boiled collar and a white shirt, and she'll cry.'

'Is it that bad?' sadly.

'Worse than that, Hashknife. Yuh look jist like a half-broke Apaloosie lookin' over a whitewashed fence.'

'I might get one with a sense of humor, Sleepy.'

'She'd have to have, cowboy.

Rex was wandering around the yard, like a lost pup, and finally joined them at the corral.

'I wish I knew what to do,' he said sadly. 'Nan is up there in the kitchen, crying. I — I tried to solace her, but it didn't seem to do much good. She's afraid they are going to hang her father, you know. Perhaps I handled the situation badly when I told her we'd both be orphans if such a thing happened. And then I asked her to marry me.'

'You damn fool!' exploded Sleepy. 'That ain't no time to propose to a girl.'

'I didn't know. You see, I — I never proposed before.'

'There's a hell of a lot of things you don't know.'

'There's a hell of a lot of things I want to learn,' retorted Rex heatedly.

'That's a lot better,' grinned Hashknife. 'Use a

little profanity and less dictionary. Correct English is great; but out here they think you're crazy. You'll forget how to talk it soon enough. As far as you marryin' Nan Lane — I'd forget it, Morgan.'

'What in hell would you support a wife on?' asked Sleepy.

'I'm sure I don't know.'

'Well, you're honest,' grinned Hashknife. 'I reckon you're a good kid, Morgan. You mean well enough. Now, forget the marriage stuff for a while.'

'The sheriff wants to marry her.'

'Fine. Lem's a good man; got a good job.'

'But I don't think she loves him.'

'No? Does she love you?'

'I — I never asked her.'

'A-a-aw, hell!' snorted Sleepy. 'Let's go and help her cook supper instead of talking about her feelin's.'

It was after supper that night when Paul Lane came home. Rex was washing the dishes and Hashknife was wiping them, much against the wishes of Nan.

'It's the only thing I can do well,' declared Rex. 'I used to wash them for my mother.'

Nan was in her room and Sleepy was perched on the woodbox, smoking a cigarette, when Paul Lane stepped into the kitchen, gun in hand. Rex was the only one of the three who had ever seen him before.

He stopped just inside the door and looked at the men.

Rex stopped washing dishes and started to introduce the old man to Hashknife, but the old man stopped him.

'Where's Nan?' he demanded.

'Here, Dad.'

Nan had stepped from her room and now she crossed the kitchen to her father, who put one arm around her, but still kept his eyes on Hashknife and Sleepy.

'Who are these men?' he asked.

'Friends, Dad; Mr. Hartley and Mr. Stevens. You have met Mr. Morgan before.'

'Yeah, I've met *him*. I've been around here quite a while, lookin' 'em over through the windows. I didn't quite figure out who they were, but it didn't look to me as though an officer of the law would be washin' dishes. I had to come back, Nan. What's the news? What has happened?'

With as few words as possible she told him everything that had happened since he left the house. She told him of the shooting of Noah Evans, the double inquest, and their verdicts. Hashknife watched the face of the old man during her recital, and decided that Paul Lane was a tough old ranger. He did not flinch at the verdict, but his blue eyes clouded a trifle.

He was not a big man, and age had sapped some of his vitality, but he was wiry, keen-eyed, and the hands that gripped the Winchester were muscular and steady.

'Kinda looks as though they had the dead wood on me and the kid,' he said bitterly. 'We been hidin' out in the brush, wonderin' what was goin' on; so I took a chance. We got a look at you fellers to-day and wondered who yuh might be. And we seen Nan come back in that buggy; so I decided that there had been an inquest at Cañonville.'

'Why don't the both of yuh sneak down and give up to the sheriff?' asked Hashknife. 'Looks like the only way out of it, Lane.'

'And get hung for it, eh?'

'Mebby not. The law won't hang yuh without a trial.'

'Meanin' that the 6 × 6 outfit will, eh?'

'Might be more than them in on the deal. There's always a pack of wolves, yuh know.'

'That's right, Hartley. It shore makes it tough for Nan.'

'And she's been mighty game,' said Hashknife quickly.

'I — I'm not so game,' choked Nan. 'I don't know what to do except to grin and bear it.'

They moved to the living-room, leaving Rex to finish the rest of the dishes, and sat down together.

Hashknife wanted a chance to talk with Paul Lane, and this seemed like the opportune time, but before he could frame the opening question, the front door was flung violently open, and three rifles were covering them through the doorway.

There were Dave Morgan, Red Eller, Spike Cahill, and Ed Jones. There was only one thing to do; so the three men in the room threw up their hands. It took Spike Cahill about ten seconds to collect their guns, and then the captors relaxed.

'I reckon that about ends the deal,' growled Dave. 'We been watchin' for yuh, Lane. Knowed you'd have to come home, sooner or later.'

'Well?' said Lane coldly. 'What now, Morgan?'

'A lot depends. Get a rope, Spike.'

'Just what's the idea of a rope?' asked Hashknife.

'Keep yore nose out of it,' growled Morgan. 'I'd advise you two to high-tail out of this country. About the time we tell folks about findin' yuh here, hobnobbin' with a man wanted for murder, they might talk of more ropes.'

'Oh, is this man wanted for murder?'

'You know damn well he is! Wasn't that girl at the inquest? Don't try to be funny.'

Spike Cahill stepped in and flung out the coils of his rope, preparatory to roping Paul Lane.

'What are you going to do?' asked Nan. 'Don't

put a rope on him. Dad will go to jail peacefully.'

'Jail, eh?' Spike laughed softly. 'Yuh think he will? After we exhibit him in Mesa City? Guess ag'in, sister.'

'You better put your hands up,' said a voice at the doorway to the kitchen, and the captors jerked around to see Rex Morgan, holding the heavy, double-barrel shotgun against his shoulder, the twin muzzles covering them.

Dave Morgan's hands jerked shoulder-high, and the other three were quick to follow his lead. Even a tenderfoot could score a bull's-eye with a shotgun at fifteen feet.

'Good, kid!' exclaimed Hashknife, while Dave Morgan swore bitterly, as he watched Sleepy and Hashknife gather up all the guns.

'You can take a rest with that gun now,' laughed Hashknife.

'Well, I'm glad,' sighed Rex. 'It is very heavy, and I was afraid some one might know it isn't loaded.'

Hashknife backed against the wall, gun in hand, and laughed at the expressions on their faces when they realized that the shotgun was not loaded.

'You can't get away with this,' gritted Morgan, facing Hashknife. 'By God, we'll show you how to tamper with things that don't concern yuh.

And we'll make that half-witted, white-faced kid wish he'd kept out of it.'

'I got away with it — my part of it,' said Hashknife coldly. 'I think that kid outsmarted yuh, and saved yuh from lynchin' a man to-night. And as far as yuh doin' anythin' about it — cut yore wolf loose.'

'We were goin' to take him to jail,' said Eller.

'You're a liar!'

Eller bristled angrily. 'You wouldn't call me that if I had a gun, you hatchet-faced bum.'

'Step into the middle of the room,' ordered Hashknife. 'Right out there, away from the rest. Watch 'em, Sleepy.' Hashknife stepped up to the bed, picked up a six-shooter and walked back to Eller, who stared at him foolishly. With a flip of his wrist, Hashknife dropped the gun into Eller's empty holster, and stepped back about six feet and holstered his own gun.

'It's an even break, Eller,' he said coldly. 'You're a liar; a dirty, forked-tongued liar. You've got a gun in yore holster, and I'm talkin' to yuh straight.'

Red Eller hesitated. Hashknife's right hand hung limply at his side, swaying back and forth past his holster, but there was nothing about his pose or expression that would indicate a quick draw. For several seconds there was no sound except the breathing of people. Then:

'Don't do it, Red,' whispered Spike. 'It ain't worth the chance.'

Eller licked his lips and shook his head.

'I pass,' he said softly. 'Mebby I did lie, Hartley.'

Swiftly Hashknife stepped over and removed the gun.

'What's next?' asked Morgan angrily.

'Go home and try to mind yore own business.'

'All right — but wait until we tell what happened.'

'Suits me, gents. Vamoose!'

Hashknife and Sleepy followed them out to their horses, where the four men mounted quickly.

'What about our guns?' asked Morgan.

'One of yuh come back in daylight and get 'em.'

'Oh, all right. But you two better not be here.'

'We will be, Morgan. Adios.'

Hashknife watched them ride away in the darkness, and went back into the house, where he found Lane shaking hands with Rex and thanking him for his timely aid with the shotgun.

'Oh, it wasn't anything,' said Rex. 'I just saw the gun in the corner, and thought I might frighten them with it.'

'Well, yuh shore did,' laughed Hashknife. 'They know what a shotgun will do at short range, and

they took no chances. Now,' he turned to Lane, 'What are you goin' to do?'

'I'm goin' to see Walter and get him to go to Cañonville with me. We might as well give up and take a chance with the law. I didn't realize until just now how safe a jail could be.'

'Oh, I'm glad!' exclaimed Nan. 'Anything would be better than this suspense. But will Walter go with you, Dad?'

'I think so. He is tired of dodging in the hills.'

'Well, I wouldn't lose any time,' declared Hashknife. 'That bunch will probably get drunk in Mesa City, and yuh never can tell what they will do.'

'I know,' nodded Lane. 'But I don't know what to do about Nan. She can't stay here ——'

'I can't stay anywhere else, Dad. I can't afford to live at a hotel. Oh, I'll be all right.'

'We'll stay awhile,' offered Hashknife. 'I can't run away now; not after that warnin'. As soon as yuh see the sheriff, send him up here. I want him to understand about that warnin', 'cause I might need an official reason for throwin' lead.'

'All right, Hartley. I'll leave my rifle and shells here, in case yuh need long range.'

He shook hands with each of them, kissed Nan, and vanished down past the corral in the darkness.

Nan sighed with relief and tried to smile.

'I guess I better finish washing the dishes,' said Rex. 'But I wish some of you would load that shotgun. I might have to shoot next time.'

'You spoke yore piece, pardner,' laughed Hashknife. 'I'll load the gun for yuh.'

He took a box of shells off a shelf and dropped one in each barrel, after which he stood the gun in a corner.

'Thank you so much,' said Rex.

'Good huntin' to yuh, brother,' grinned Hashknife.

'Oh, but I'm not going hunting for any one.'

'You won't have to. In Arizona, that kind of game comes right up to yore door.'

CHAPTER XI

THE NAVAJO RUG

It is doubtful if any of his friends would have recognized Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs as he stood against the Oasis bar that night. On his narrow, slightly grizzled head was an ancient brown derby hat, several sizes too small. Around his skinny neck was a high, bat-wing collar, plenty large enough for Napoleon to sink into up to his generous ears, and his bosom was resplendent in a once-white, starched bosom shirt.

He wore no vest, no necktie, and his old brown coat showed evidences of its long vacation inside a war-bag. His overalls were glaringly new, tucked inside a pair of high-heel boots, which emitted an unmistakable odor of stove polish. Inside the waist-band of his overalls, the butt of it reposing against the lower end of his shirt-bosom, was a heavy Colt revolver.

And Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs was drunk. It was seldom that Briggs ever came to Mesa City on a drunk, and no one had ever seen him dressed in this manner.

'I'm goin' awa-a-ay, fer, fer awa-a-a-ay,' he sang mournfully. 'Where the swee-e-e-et swy-ring-ga bloo-o-oms.'

'You thinkin' of takin' a long trip?' asked the bartender.

Nap cuffed his derby over one eye and considered the bartender solemnly.

'Feller; when Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs dudes up thisaway, he's halfway there.'

'Ocean voyage, Nap?'

'Not unless there's a cloudburst between here and Cañonville. I aims to ride a fo'-legged hawse. Gimme another scoop of that liquor, which tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, and charge it to the house.'

'Can't do that, Nap. Jack says to make everything cash until he finds out what's to become of this place.'

'Become of it?'

'Yeah, you know; since Peter Morgan died.'

'Oh, yeah,' sadly.

'Have one on me.'

Napoleon considered the bartender thoughtfully as the glasses were placed on the bar, and he saw the bartender take money from his own pocket and put it in the till.

'Well, here's luck, Nap,' said the bartender. They drank their liquor straight, and Nap cuffed his hat to the back of his head.

'I reckon I'll keep you,' he said seriously.

'Keep me?' queried the bartender.

'Uh-huh. You're kinda human. I thought at first that I'd do m' own bartendin', but mebby I won't. Now, let's have one on me. I've got money.'

Came the staccato thudding of hoofs, the rattle of spurs on the wooden sidewalk, and in came Dave Morgan, leading the boys who had been with him at the Lane ranch. They were all thirsty and mad, it required two rounds of drinks before they were able to discuss the events of the evening.

Napoleon moved to the end of the bar, standing in solitary grandeur, as though not wishing to associate with the common herd in his present habiliments.

'My Gawd!' blurted Spike Cahill, spying Napoleon. 'There's the ghost of old man Briggs lookin' over his own tombstone!'

'Oh, to hell with him!' snorted Dave Morgan, invigorated by the potent liquor. 'Let's decide what's to be done.'

'And not a gun in the crowd,' said Napoleon, noting the empty holsters. 'O-o-o-oh, I'm go-in' fer, fer awa-a-ay, where the swee-e-e-et swy-rin-ga bloo-o-o-oms.'

'What's the idea of the boiled clothes, Nap?' asked Spike.

'Celebratin' m' releash from bondage, Spike. I'm through cookin'.'

'No-o-o-o!'

'Yessir. Been rasslin' pots for the 6 × 6 for over twenty years, and it's time I retired.'

Jack Fairweather, manager of the Oasis, came in beside Dave Morgan, nodding to each of the boys. Fairweather was a small man, about fifty years old, who had been long in the employ of Peter Morgan.

'I've been tryin' to get some dope on this situation,' he told Dave. 'Nobody seems to know just what is to be done. As far as I can find out, Peter left no will. He never had any use for a lawyer, and they tell me at the bank that there is no will, as far as they know. What's to be done?'

'I dunno,' growled Dave. 'What's usually done in a case of this kind?'

'Well, I suppose the property belongs to his nearest relative. You ought to know who that would be, Dave.'

'He didn't have no real close relatives, Jack. His mother and father are both dead, and he was the only kid they had. There was just two boys in the family, my father and Pete's father. They're both dead.'

'Well, it looks as though you owned somethin', Dave.'

'I suppose so. As long as there's no will ——'

'Who the hell says there ain't?' demanded Napoleon.

And thus Napoleon became the center of attraction. He had been so long with the 6 × 6 that it might be possible he *did* know something of interest. Dave Morgan glared at him, but Napoleon was too drunk to mind a glare.

'What are you talkin' about?' demanded Dave.

'What do you know about it?' countered Napoleon. He almost lost his derby in giving his head a quick jerk.

'What about a will, Nap?' asked Fairweather.

'Oh, thasall right,' muttered Napoleon foolishly.

'Did yuh ever see a will?' asked Spike.

'I've seen a lot of 'em.'

'A lot of 'em that Peter Morgan wrote?' asked Fairweather.

'Nossir.'

'Drunk as a boiled owl,' grunted Red Eller. 'He don't know what it's all about. Let's have another drink.'

'I'm not drunk,' declared Napoleon. 'I know a will when I shee one. Gimme shome of yore tannin' fluid.'

'What's the idea of the clothes?' queried Spike.

'Duded up f'r a trip to Cañonville.'

'Napoleon,' grinned Spike, 'have you got a girl?'

'Nossir, I ain't got no girl; I'm goin' on 'ficial business to the county sheat. These are m' 'ficial clothes. Here's m' regards, gents.'

Napoleon drank a full glass of liquor, groped his way to a chair, where he flopped down heavily. His derby rolled off across the floor, and Red Eller kicked it the length of the room. But Napoleon was not too drunk to witness this bit of horseplay, and his hand groped drunkenly for the butt of his six-shooter. But after several ineffectual efforts to draw the gun, he made a gesture of despair, slumped down in the chair and began snoring.

'If he'd been sober, he'd have killed you, Red,' declared Spike.

'If he'd been sober, I wouldn't have kicked the hat.'

'Hell!' snorted Ed Jones. 'If he had been sober, he wouldn't have worn such a damn lookin' hat.'

'Who cares what he would have done?' growled Dave. 'What I want to know is, what are we goin' to do?'

'Search me,' said Spike. 'I know damn well I'm not goin' back there ag'in to-night.'

'Goin' to craw-fish on this job?'

'Not craw-fish, Dave. Old man Lane won't be there; so what could we gain by goin' back?'

'I reckon that's true.'

Dave explained to Fairweather what had taken place at the Lane ranch, but the gambler had no suggestions to offer.

'I'll ride down in the mornin' and collect the

guns,' offered Spike. 'I'm not scared. They said we could have 'em in daylight."

Red Eller and Ed Jones decided that they wanted to play a little poker, and Dave Morgan wanted to go home; so Dave went away alone. Others drifted in and the games filled up, while Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs slept off his jag, and awoke with a stiff neck and the disposition of a grizzly.

He found the brim of his derby hat, which Red Eller had kicked loose from its crown, and it pained him greatly. He accepted a drink, went out to his horse, which he mounted and headed for Cañonville.

'If that horse ever bucks, that collar will slice old Briggs's ears off,' declared Spike Cahill. 'Funny old coot. Him and Pete Morgan was pretty close friends, even if they did cuss each other out at least once a day.'

'What do you suppose he meant — about that will?' asked Jack Fairweather.

'Liquor talkin'. Old Briggs would rather argue than eat. The minute somebody says "there is," old Briggs is sure to say "there ain't." But I sure don't sabe that boiled shirt and collar and the hard hat.'

It was three days after the voluntary surrender of Paul Lane and his son, when Hashknife, Rex, and

Lem Sheeley rode to Mesa City from the Lane ranch. Spike Cahill had come to the ranch the day after their attempt to capture Paul Lane and recovered their guns. If Spike bore any malice toward Hashknife, Sleepy, or Rex he failed to show it, but at that time he did not know that Paul Lane had surrendered to the sheriff.

Both men had sworn that they were innocent of the charge, and they both denied shooting Noah Evans, who was slowly recovering. Long Lane swore he had not seen Ben Leach after he left the Oasis saloon, and that he did not take Ben's horse and gun.

Of course, no one believed them, and every one knew that they had surrendered to the law rather than take a chance of being lynched. Their guilt was so firmly fixed in the eyes of the cattlemen that any twelve men in the county would have convicted them without leaving the jury-box.

Sleepy urged Hashknife to forget the case. As far as he could see there was nothing to keep them in the Black Horse range any longer, and Sleepy was anxious to get settled in a job for the winter.

But Hashknife was not satisfied. The shooting of Noah Evans was one thing unexplained. After talking with Paul Lane, he was satisfied that neither the old man nor his son was bitter enough against the 6 × 6 to bushwhack one of that outfit,

especially when the light was so bad that they could not identify their target.

And there was Rex Morgan, whom Sleepy had dubbed 'The *Orejano*.' Who in Mesa City had sent money to his mother? wondered Hashknife. And that was the reason why Hashknife, Rex, and the sheriff had ridden to Mesa City. Hashknife had talked it over with Lem Sheeley, and they decided to seek information at the Mesa City Bank.

Jim Harker, the Mesa City banker, a small, wiry man, with heavy glasses, welcomed them cordially. He had known the sheriff for years.

'Well, what's on your mind, Lem?' he asked, after Lem had introduced the others.

'Peter Morgan banked with you, didn't he, Jim?'

The banker smiled slowly. 'What banking he did — yes.'

'What do yuh mean by that, Jim?'

'He didn't do much banking, Lem. Peter Morgan was rather a queer person, and preferred having his money nearer than a bank vault.'

'You mean, he kept it at the ranch?'

'I suspect he did, Lem.'

'Well, here's somethin' we want to find out, Jim.' And Lem explained about Rex's mother receiving the seventy-five-dollar check. The banker listened closely, and when Lem finished he shook his head thoughtfully.

'Was that the only check from here that you have seen?' he asked Rex.

'That was the only one, Mr. Harker. But I feel sure that my mother received money from some one.'

'The name of Morgan kinda had us guessin',' said Lem.

The banker smiled slowly, thoughtfully.

'I don't suppose I'd be violating any confidence, now that Peter Morgan is dead,' he said, 'but the fact of the matter is this — Peter Morgan could not write.'

'Couldn't write?' pondered Lem.

'He had no education whatever. In fact, when he wished to draw a check, I signed his name for him. So that answers your question regarding that particular check.'

'Could it have been Dave Morgan?' asked Hashknife.

The banker shook his head quickly. 'No. Dave Morgan closed his account with us several months ago. I think I was the only one in this country who knew that Peter Morgan could not write. He was very sensitive about it. I don't believe Dave Morgan knew it. When there were any papers to be signed, Peter always brought them to me.'

'You never heard him mention a will, did yuh?' asked Hashknife.

'No, I never did. I'm sure I should have known about it if there had been one. I understand you have Paul Lane in jail for murdering Peter.'

'Yeah, he's down there,' sighed Lem.

'Any question about his guilt, Lem?'

'I hope so, Jim. I dunno what defense the old man will put up. If he wasn't a nester, he might get off. Yuh see, he warned Peter to keep away from his place. There ain't no direct evidence that Morgan was killed on the Lane ranch, but the jury will probably think he was.'

'How is Noah Evans getting along?'

'Kinda slow. The doctor seems to think he's out of danger. I reckon he is; he cusses all the time.'

They thanked the banker for his information. Lem had other business to transact; so they left him in Mesa City and rode back to the ranch. Hashknife was disappointed. He had expected some information from the banker which might be of some value to him, but, as far as he could see, they were up against a blank wall.

Rex had nothing to offer. He couldn't remember what the signature on that check looked like.

'I don't know what to do,' he told Hashknife. 'I can't stay here all my life. I haven't any money, and no place to go. Rather a puzzling situation, isn't it?'

'Well, we're in the same boat,' smiled Hashknife.

'But our case is a little different, except that we can't all pull out and leave that girl here alone. The Lanes haven't any money, either. It looks to me as though we've all got to stay here and see what works out. Me and Sleepy have enough for a grub-stake for all of us, I reckon.'

'Well, I suppose we'll have to do something like that.'

'Sure. But the limb of the law waves so damn slow in a country like this that we'll wear the seats out of our pants waitin' for them to try the Lane family for murder. I reckon we'll just stick around and see what happens.'

They talked it over with Nan and Sleepy at the ranch. Nan wanted to go to Cañonville and try for a job.

'I might get work in a restaurant,' she said. 'That would relieve you boys of my presence. I didn't realize the situation until now.'

'You are not going to work in any restaurant,' declared Rex warmly. 'We can get along out here. I've still got my five dollars.'

'You bloated financier!' exploded Sleepy. 'If you knew anythin' about poker, I'd take that five away from yuh.'

'I don't know anything about poker,' said Rex quickly, 'but if you want the five, I'll give it to you, Sleepy.'

'Thank yuh,' grunted Sleepy, rather taken back by Rex's generosity. 'I reckon yore all right, kid; we'll get along.'

'Can yuh imagine that?' he asked Hashknife a little later on.

'Rex is all right, Sleepy.'

'Shore, he's all right. Pretty heavy on education, but he'll get that knocked out of him in a short time. Do yuh know, I've got a hunch that Nan thinks quite a lot of him.'

'She's sorry for him.'

'Yeah, and he's sorry for her. He looks at her like a dyin' calf in the spring thaw.'

They took care of their horses and wandered back to the house, where they found Nan and Rex on the porch, talking confidentially. Nan seemed very determined about something, and Rex seemed troubled. Hashknife sprawled on the steps and rolled a cigarette.

'I want to tell you something, Hashknife,' said Nan. 'Rex don't think I should, but ——'

'I wouldn't,' said Rex firmly.

'But I think you boys understand,' said Nan. 'Oh, it won't hurt anything, Rex — not now. We haven't told anybody, except my father.'

'Go ahead,' urged Hashknife. 'I suppose it's about findin' Peter Morgan's body, ain't it? And sendin' it home on the horse?'

Nan gasped, staring at Hashknife. 'What — why, how did you know?'

'Guessed it, Nan. Lem found you and Rex in the corral. Rex had fainted. And then Lem found Peter Morgan's six-gun in the corral. It wasn't more than an hour or so later that the body of Morgan came to the 6 × 6.'

'And you just guessed it?' asked Nan wonderingly.

'Somethin' like that, Nan. I figured that you and Rex had a secret between yuh. Would yuh mind takin' me down to the corral and showin' me just how the body lay, and all that?'

'And — and you don't blame us for what we done?' asked Nan.

'Certainly not; I'd have done the same. C'mon.'

They all went down to the corral, where Nan explained all about the position of the body, and how they had secured the horse from the willows across the stream and had managed to rope the body to the saddle.

Hashknife listened closely, questioning both of them as to small details, and even examined the dust closely, where Peter Morgan's body had lain. Nan pointed out the place where the horse had been tied, and Rex took Hashknife over to the spot where he secured the horse.

The ground was fairly soft along the creek, and

Hashknife was able to distinguish the tracks of the shod horse.

'Mr. Morgan must have left his horse here while he went over to the corner of the stable,' said Rex.

Hashknife grunted, as he studied the tracks closely. From where they stood, the horse would have been invisible to any one at the ranch-house. The presumption would have been that Morgan rode up to the willows from that side of the creek, not taking any chances of being seen; but the tracks showed that the horse had crossed the stream twice; one set of tracks, of course, being made when Rex took the animal over to the corral. It proved that the rider had come in past the corral, crossed the creek, and tied the horse over there.

They came back to the bank of the little creek, where Hashknife stopped again to examine the tracks. The stream was about four feet wide and two feet deep at this point. Rex sprang across and went back to the corral fence, while Hashknife squatted on his heels on the creek bank.

Suddenly he got to his feet and looked down the stream, where the water swung around an undercut bank, practically undermining a heavy growth of willows. Something had attracted his attention, and he shoved down through the brush to this spot, where he sprawled along the bank, reaching down in the water.

After some little effort he was able to draw out the object, which he lugged back to a clear space. It was a Navajo rug, about four feet wide and five feet long, which had been rolled tightly and tied at both ends with whang-leather strings.

Hashknife cut the strings and unrolled the rug. It was rather difficult to tell how long the rug had been in the water. It was rather discolored, but the pattern was clear enough. The two ends of the rug were of red and gray design, while the center was dead black, with a jagged strip of white, representing the Navajo idea of lightning.

Hashknife carried the rug over to the corral, where he spread it out on the ground. It was a very distinctive pattern, and Nan was sure she had never seen it before. Just why it was in the creek, none of them were able to say. It was not a rug that any one would discard. He hung it over the top-pole of the corral to dry out, and left it there, dripping down across the poles.

'That must have been a beautiful rug,' sighed Nan. 'I have always admired Navajo rugs, but we have always been too poor to buy one.'

'You can have that one,' smiled Hashknife. 'Probably take a lot of washin' to clean it up. Lot of that silt has soaked up in it, and it'll take time to get it out. Might be better to let it dry, and then beat it out.'

'What would they do to us if they knew what we had done?' asked Rex anxiously.

'I dunno,' smiled Hashknife. 'Better not tell anybody else. It would be a point for the prosecution, yuh know. It would prove just where Peter Morgan was killed. It's too bad yuh didn't think to get that gun.'

'We were too excited to think of anything except to get the body away from here,' said Nan.

'I'll betcha. That was shore some job for you two. Now, we'll just forget all that.'

It was about an hour later when Lem Sheeley rode in at the ranch. Nan was busy in the kitchen, but the three men were on the porch to meet him.

'I've got a little information for yuh,' said the sheriff, declining to dismount. 'After you boys left town, Jim Harker called me back to the bank. Yuh see, bankers are kinda close when it comes to talkin' about things, and he didn't know yuh very well.

'Here's what he told me, boys. Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs is the one who has been sendin' money to a Mary Morgan. He has been sendin' it for years. Jim said he never asked Nap about it, 'cause he figured it wasn't his business.

'He said he wondered where Briggs got the money, until one day Peter Morgan told him that Briggs had an interest in the 6 × 6. Now, mebby

yuh can find out from Briggs what it's all about, Hashknife. Harker don't know a thing about it, except that Briggs kept a balance in the bank, and mostly every month he sent a check away. Harker says he don't know any Mary Morgan.'

'Old man Briggs is the cook at the 6 × 6, ain't he, Lem?' asked Hashknife.

'Yeah, a queer old pelican. Been with the 6 × 6 since these hills were holes in the ground. Don't start any argument, 'cause it won't get yuh anywhere with him. I wish yuh luck in findin' out anythin'. Just thought mebby you'd like to know; so I dropped in. Got to get back before dark.'

Hashknife thanked him for the information, and Lem rode on toward Cañonville.

'It shore is worse tangled than ever now,' said Hashknife. 'I reckon the name Morgan is just a coincidence in this case, Rex. But just where does Briggs come in on it?'

'Oh, I suppose we'll never find out,' sighed Rex. 'But after all, what difference does it make? It can't affect my future in any way. Still, I'd like to know. Don't you see the position I am in? Suppose' — Rex hesitated for a moment — 'suppose I wanted to marry a girl, and she asked me about my father?'

'Tell her he died before you was born,' advised Hashknife.

'But that would be a lie.'

'How do you know?'

'But I couldn't prove it, Hashknife.'

'Any girl who likes you well enough to marry yuh won't make yuh prove when yore father died, kid.'

'But I don't even know I had a father.'

'Well, yuh won't have to prove that. Just forget that yuh went through life kinda one-sided on parents. And don't argue with me. I want to set down and think about Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs and a dirty Navajo rug.'

Sleepy went into the house, where he flopped on the old couch, burying his nose in an old magazine, while Rex sat down on a corner of the porch, watching the changing lights on the hills as the sun sank lower in the west.

It was as though a painter, unsatisfied with an effect, would swiftly blot out a streak of gold and draw in a full brush of violet; only to change it to a deep mauve and then to an opaque cobalt; striking new highlights with glowing gold.

Farther to the north a great flock of birds, like a lot of black sheets of paper caught in a whirlwind, spiraled up from among the hills, always traveling in circles. Rex watched them, fascinated. They did not seem to flap their wings, but mounted higher and higher. Some of them circled back to earth,

but seemed to come back, flapping their wings, as though in haste to gain altitude.

'What kind of birds are those, Hashknife?' asked Rex.

'Buzzards,' he said indifferently.

'I tried to count them, but they weave back and forth so swiftly, and each one looks like the other.'

Hashknife relaxed and reached for his cigarette papers.

'Scavengers, Rex; a big bird who smells death, they say. But I don't believe it, because I've fooled 'em. I've stretched out on the desert, played dead, and had them down so close I pulled feathers out of their tails.'

'Is there something dead over there, Hashknife?'

'Undoubtedly. They've been having a feast, and are pulling out before dark. Mebby a coyote or two came along and started an argument.'

'Dead cow, do you suppose?'

Hashknife squinted quizzically at the gyrating flock, slowly mounting higher. They were not splitting up, as a flock usually does, when the feast is over; but rather they were acting as though something had interrupted them. Hashknife grinned and turned to Rex.

'Let's take a rifle and go over there, kid. It's in

a little swale off the road, and we might knock over a coyote.'

Rex was willing. Hashknife called to Sleepy, asking him to go along.

'Goin' to ride over?' asked Sleepy.

'It's only a little ways,' replied Hashknife.

'Count me out. I wouldn't walk a mile for all the coyotes in Arizona.'

Hashknife took Paul Lane's thirty-thirty, and they walked up the road, while the buzzards still circled. It was a little over a mile to where they left the road, and about a quarter of a mile from where Ben Leach had been killed.

From the road they went cautiously through the brushy swale, circling the thickets of mesquite. Suddenly a coyote went streaking across the swale, almost invisible in the waning light. Hashknife stepped back, swinging up the Winchester, and as the animal started up the slope of the hill on the opposite side of the swale, the rifle cracked sharply and the coyote gave a convulsive sideways leap, landed in a Spanish dagger, from whence it went yipping along through the brush, telling the world in coyote language what it thought of a man who would drive a thirty-thirty bullet in front of the nose of any well-meaning coyote.

'Led him too much,' laughed Hashknife. 'Didja see him set down in that dagger? Talk about any-

thin' bein' full of pins and needles! I had a hunch that some coyotes had chased them buzzards from their supper.'

They circled another clump of mesquite and found what had attracted the scavengers. It was what was left of a blue-roan horse, which was still wearing a saddle and bridle. The buzzards and coyotes had made a sorry mess of it, but the saddle and bridle were still intact.

With his pocket-knife, Hashknife cut the *latigo*, and drew the saddle away from the carcass. It was a good grade of stock saddle, with stamped seat and fenders. The skin of the animal had been literally torn to shreds, obliterating the brand, but leaving enough to identify its color.

Hashknife examined the head of the animal for possible bullet holes, but found none. Upon closer examination, however, he found that the horse's shoulder had been broken. The bridle reins were tangled about the other leg, drawing the head of the animal sharply downward.

No doubt the coyotes had pulled the body about to some extent, but Hashknife was able to read the signs fairly plain.

'I reckon this was Ben Leach's horse,' he told Rex. 'It busted its shoulder in some way, leavin' it to hobble on three legs until the reins got tangled in the other front leg and threw it. Mebby the fall

broke its neck, or mebby it just couldn't get up, and the coyotes finished it.'

'Does it mean anything?' asked Rex.

'Well, it means that Walter Lane didn't steal the horse, which is one point in his favor.'

Hashknife hung the saddle in a mesquite thicket, and they went back home, leaving the way clear for the coyotes to continue their interrupted meal. The buzzards had disappeared by this time.

'If it hadn't been for those buzzards, we should never have found that horse,' said Rex.

'That's true,' thoughtfully. 'Sometimes it's a good plan to foller the buzzards, kid. Yuh never can tell what yuh might find.'

CHAPTER XII

AN EMPTY SAFE

'WHAT right have you got to open the safe?' demanded Dell Bowen. 'This ranch ain't never been turned over to yuh, Dave.'

Dave Morgan, standing in the center of the 6 × 6 ranch-house living-room, smiled sarcastically at Dell Bowen. With Morgan was Ed Jones, his right-hand man. Spike Cahill and Bert Roddy were standing beside a small, old-fashioned iron safe against the west wall of the room.

On the table beside Morgan was a collection of papers, some money; the miscellaneous stuff which had been taken from Peter Morgan's pockets. Dave Morgan held a key in his hand, which he had taken from the table.

'It will be, as far as that's concerned,' said Morgan.

'Then yuh better wait until it is, Dave.'

'Yea-a-ah? Well, I'm just a little curious to know what's in that safe, Dell. All this talk about wills has kinda made me wonder if there is such a thing. You boys can check up everythin' in there, and I won't take anythin'.'

'Well, that might be all right,' dubiously. 'As

long as we put everythin' back, Dave. I don't want to get in bad with the law, you know.'

They went over to the safe and watched Dave Morgan insert the key. The safe opened easily. For a moment there was no sound, and then Spike Cahill whistled softly.

The safe was empty! Not even a scrap of paper. Dave got to his feet, looking from face to face.

'Looks pretty clean, don't it?' he asked softly.

'It does,' admitted Dell Bowen.

Dave walked back to the table and dropped the key. He did not bother to lock it again.

'I don't quite sabe that empty safe,' said Bowen. 'The boss must 'a' cleaned it out before he got killed.'

'Yuh think he did, eh?' sneered Morgan.

'Well, it shore looks that away, Dave.'

'Yea-a-ah? Huh! I don't sabe why that key wasn't turned over to the sheriff. Leavin' it layin' around ——'

'Wait a minute,' cautioned Bowen. 'You ain't aimin' to put the dead wood on any of us, are yuh?'

'I'm not aimin' at anybody,' angrily. 'But it don't look right for that safe to be empty, does it?'

'Aw, what the hell!' snorted Spike. 'It's empty, and that's all there is to it.'

'Mebby not *all*,' retorted Dave. 'Pete must have

had some money. There's damn little in the bank; I found that out.'

'Well, what are yuh goin' to do about it?' demanded Dell. 'It shore looks to me as though yuh was a little previous, Dave.'

'Yuh think so, do yuh, Bowen?' Dave hooked his thumbs over his cartridge belt and glared at the red-faced cowboy who had acted as Peter Morgan's foreman. 'Lemme tell *you* somethin'. This 6 × 6 belongs to me. It's only a matter of a few days until I move in here and take charge.'

'Suits me,' grunted Bowen.

Dave hunched his shoulders and scanned the faces of the three 6 × 6 cowboys.

'And I'll prob'ly hire my own crew,' he added meaningly.

'And far as I'm concerned, you can hire 'em right now, Morgan; I'm through.'

'Same here,' nodded Spike, and Bert nodded in agreement.

'Yuh don't need to go off half-cocked,' said Dave quickly.

'As far as I'm concerned, yuh can go to hell,' said Bowen coldly. 'And another thing, Morgan; don't ever make the crack that any of us unlocked that safe. If yuh do, we'll shore take yuh apart to see what makes yuh tick.'

'I don't reckon I need to make any cracks,

Bowen. And as far as takin' me apart is concerned, I'll be right there, showin' yuh what makes me tick.'

The three cowboys headed for the door.

'Yuh might take Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs along with yuh,' said Dave. 'I reckon I can find a cook.'

'He's gone already,' growled Spike. 'Pulled out several days ago. The night the tenderfoot made us back-water with an empty shotgun, old man Briggs headed for Cañonville.'

'Well, if yuh see him, yuh can tell him he don't need to come back.'

'If he knows you're here, it's a cinch he won't want to.'

It did not take the three boys long to pack their belongings in their war-bags. Dave Morgan and Ed Jones sat on the spacious porch of the ranch-house and watched them saddle their horses and leave the ranch.

Dave Morgan smiled around at his possessions. The 6 × 6 was the biggest ranch in the country. Even the stable was a better building than the ranch-house at the Flying M.

'Got kinda salty, didn't they?' grinned Dave.

'They allus have been,' said Ed slowly. 'I was wonderin' about old man Briggs, Dave. He pulled out several days ago, and he had plenty chance to open that safe.'

Dave smiled thoughtfully. 'I'll betcha you're right, Ed. That old pelican cleaned out that safe and skipped the country. I'll get in touch with the sheriff as soon as I can, and we'll see if we can't find Briggs. He's the man.'

'Another thing,' said Jones. 'You'll have to hire some punchers, Dave. We can't run both places. What yuh ort to do is to hire a crew to run the Flyin' M, and let us come here.'

'Might be a good idea. I dunno where I'd find any men right now.'

'How about them two jiggers at the Lane place? Oh, I know yuh don't like 'em, but they look like cowmen, Dave.'

'I know,' nodded Dave. 'I kinda hate to go ahead and hire a crew until this thing is all settled up, but I reckon I might as well. To-morrow I'll go down to Cañonville and have a talk with a lawyer. He can fix it all up for me, and in the meantime, I'll ride down to the Lane place and have a talk with them two fellers. I don't quite sabe what they're doin' around here, and it might be a good scheme to have 'em where we know what they're doin'.'

'You don't think they're in here to pull anythin' crooked, do yuh, Dave?' asked Ed.

'*Quien sabe?* They're shore backin' the Lane family, and I might be doin' the law a favor by

hirin' 'em away from the Lane ranch. You can stay here, Ed. Mebby yuh better ride back to the ranch and get Red to come over with yuh. Move yore stuff over. I'll stay at the Flyin' M with Cal until I get things fixed up. And I'll see if I can rustle a cook for here.'

That same morning Hashknife had been doing considerable thinking about the dead horse they had found; so he decided to ride to Cañonville and have a talk with the sheriff. Nan wanted to send some clean clothes to the jail; so Sleepy decided to go along. With both of the Lanes in jail, there was nothing for Nan to be worried about, as far as the 6 × 6 was concerned. Anyway, Rex would stay.

After they went away he investigated the Navajo rug, and found it practically dry. He carried it up beside the house and proceeded to hammer the dirt out of it. Armed with a section of broom-handle he beat industriously, and was so engaged when Dave Morgan rode up.

Rex was a bit apprehensive when he saw who the rider was, but Dave's grin was reassuring.

'Cleanin' house?' he asked, glancing at the rug.

'Not exactly,' said Rex, wiping the perspiration off his nose. 'Mr. Hartley discovered this rug in the creek yesterday. I doubt that I shall ever be able to beat the dirt out of it.'

'Found it in the creek, eh?'

'Yes. Queer, isn't it? Looks like a good rug. It has a very distinctive pattern, don't you think?'

'Yea-a-ah, it has.'

Nan came to the door and saw Dave Morgan. He smiled at her and lifted his hat.

'How do yuh do, Miss Lane?'

Nan nodded coldly.

'Aw, let's be friends,' he laughed. 'I don't blame yuh for the way yuh feel. No? Well, I'm sorry. Where's Hartley and his pardner?'

'Oh, they went to Cañonville to-day,' said Rex quickly. 'We found the horse and saddle which belonged to Ben Leach last night, and I think Mr. Hartley wished to talk to the sheriff about it.'

'Thasso? Where did yuh find it?'

Rex pointed vaguely toward the hills. 'Out there. It had a broken shoulder, and the coyotes had eaten it nearly all up.'

'Yea-a-ah?' Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Well, that's funny.'

He turned to Nan. 'Mebby yore brother didn't take Ben's horse, after all. That'll be good evidence in his favor.'

'I hope something will be in his favor,' wearily.

'You just leave it to Hashknife Hartley,' said Rex. 'He knows things. Sleepy told me that Hashknife saw things that other men overlooked.'

'Is that so? I wanted to have a talk with 'em

to-day. I've taken over the 6 × 6, and I need some help. In fact, I'd like to get them to run the Flyin' M for me, because I want to move my crew over to the 6 × 6.

'I might be able to use you, too,' he said to Rex. 'You can learn.'

'Certainly, I can learn,' said Rex, smiling.

Dave looked at Nan thoughtfully.

'You've been cookin' for these three men, ain't yuh?'

Nan nodded. 'After a fashion.'

'Well, now here's what I was thinkin' about. This place don't need much attention. Why don't yuh all move over to the Flyin' M, Miss Lane? You can do the cookin'. Take what little stock you've got over there. It's better than this.

'Under the circumstances, there ain't a thing yuh can do here. That trial won't come off for another month, at least. Why not try a whirl at the Flyin' M? At least you'll get paid for yore work.'

'Why, I don't know —' faltered Nan. 'I — I don't know what to say.'

'Well, think it over. When Hartley comes back, talk it over with him. If yuh want the jobs, you'll probably find me at the Flyin' M. I'm goin' to Cañonville to-morrow to see a lawyer, but I'll be back late in the afternoon. Don't hold it against

me for the things my cousin done to yuh. I'm owner of the 6 × 6 now, and I don't mind a nester.'

'It is nice of you to make us that offer,' said Nan.

'Nothin' of the kind; I need yuh. Let me know what yuh decide to do. Well, I'll see yuh later.'

Dave Morgan tipped his sombrero and rode away, while Rex essayed an awkward dance on the half-cleaned rug. He was enthused over a chance to get a job. But Nan did not share his enthusiasm.

'Why, Nan, he's all right,' said Rex. 'He's so different from what he was the last time he was here.'

'Very much different,' said Nan seriously. 'I can't trust men who suffer such great changes. Hang that dirty rug on the fence and get me some wood. I'm trying to bake an apple pie for supper, and I need a hot oven.'

Rex shouldered the rug and turned toward the corral, but swung around facing Nan.

'If I had a lucrative position, would you marry me?'

Nan flushed slightly. 'That question is a whole lot like saying, "If we had some ham we could have some ham and eggs, if we had some eggs."'

'I see,' blankly. 'Well, I shall get you the wood, Nan. I'm afraid I'll never get this rug cleaned. It seems to be badly stained.'

'Well, hang it on the fence.'

Dave Morgan decided to go to Cañonville that day instead of waiting until the next, and he was within a couple of miles of the town when he met the sheriff, Hashknife, and Sleepy. The sheriff had considered the dead horse worthy of further investigation, and they were on their way to the Lane ranch.

Dave greeted them in a friendly manner, and told them he had been at the Lane ranch.

'Didja see old Briggs in Cañonville?' he asked Lem.

'He ain't there, Dave. What do yuh want Briggs for?'

Dave told them of the empty safe at the 6 × 6. He did not directly accuse Briggs of theft, but he intimated that the guilt lay between Briggs and the other three cowboys, with most of the evidence against Briggs, because he had seemingly left the country.

'How do yuh know there was anythin' in the safe before Peter Morgan was killed?' asked Hashknife.

'I don't know that there was, Hartley; but there should have been. Pete wasn't very strong for banks, and it don't seem reasonable that the safe would be empty, does it?'

'Who had charge of the key?' asked Lem.

'Anybody at the ranch. They had the keys,

along with the other stuff they took from Pete's pockets, in a drawer of the table. Any of them could have swiped the key and looted the safe, Lem.'

Lem considered the matter gravely.

'It's kinda hard to accuse anybody of theft when yuh don't know anythin' has been stolen, Dave. There's no record of what was in the safe. Old Briggs has had several days to make his getaway, and nobody knows which way he went.'

'Yeah, that's true. I suppose we might as well forget that safe.'

'Best thing to do, Dave. Have you taken over the 6 × 6?'

'Just about. I'm goin' to see a lawyer now and have him fix it up.'

He turned to Hashknife. 'I need two good men, Hartley. The crew at the 6 × 6 have quit, and I'm kinda short-handed. If you'll take the job, I'll put yuh in charge of the Flyin' M. I had a talk with Miss Lane and the young feller awhile ago, and I made her a proposition to cook for yuh. She's cookin' for yuh now; so she might as well make some money out of it. I can use the kid, too. He ain't worth much, but he'll learn. What do yuh say?'

'I dunno,' smiled Hashknife. 'Sounds all right. I'll talk it over with Miss Lane and see what she

thinks. We can't step out and leave her alone, yuh see.'

'No, that wouldn't be right. You talk it over with her and let me know. I want to move my outfit over to the 6 × 6 as soon as I can. As far as Lane's stock is concerned, he's only got a few head, and yuh can herd them over to my place.'

'Well, that's nice of yuh, Morgan.'

'It'll help me out a whole lot.'

Hashknife promised to talk it over with Nan, and they rode on. Sleepy was rather jubilant over the chance to go to work, especially if Hashknife was to have charge of the ranch. But Hashknife had little to say about it.

'Don't yuh think he's a little previous about takin' over the 6 × 6?' asked Hashknife.

'Looks thataway,' replied Lem. 'Still, he might as well, I suppose. Now, that he owns the Oasis, he'll probably drink himself to death. Dave's all right, though. He's all excited over that 6 × 6.'

'Probably was an awful blow to find the safe empty,' grinned Sleepy.

'Sure. Just between us, I'll bet old Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs did clean out that safe. He just about emptied it and headed out of the country.'

'What about his share of the 6 × 6?' queried Hashknife. 'The banker at Mesa City mentioned it to you, didn't he?'

'Mebby Briggs's share was in the safe,' chuckled Lem. 'Briggs hated Dave Morgan, and he knew Dave would inherit the 6 × 6; so he just took his share out of the safe and busted up the pardnership. Anyway, it's too bad they didn't turn that key over to me.'

They left the main road and soon came to the spot where Ben Leach had been killed. Hashknife had never had much of that incident explained to him, but Lem pointed out where Ben had fallen, according to what the others had told him, because they had moved the body before he had a chance to view it.

The old road was very rocky at this point. Hashknife dismounted and walked along the right side of the road, which was piled with broken boulders. Suddenly he grunted aloud and reached down among the rocks.

He had found a Colt forty-five revolver. The other two men swung down from their horses and came over to him. The spur of the hammer had been broken off, and one shot had been fired. It was a single-action gun, well oiled.

Hashknife examined it closely and smiled at Lem, as he handed him the gun.

'There's the missin' six-shooter,' he said. 'Ben Leach shot himself.'

'Shot himself? How do yuh ——'

'Probably ridin' with the gun in his hand, Lem. The horse stumbled on this rocky ground, fell and broke its shoulder, throwin' Ben. See where the spur of that hammer hit a rock?'

'You mean, the hammer hit the rock, fired the shell — and killed Ben?'

'Don't it look reasonable, Lem? He was probably ridin' fast, and when the horse fell, he flung the gun on the rocks. The horse got up and went limpin' off across country, until it got the other front foot tangled in the reins, and went down for keeps. Yuh can see that the hammer of the gun hit the rocks and fired that shell.'

'Well, by Gad!' blurted Lem. 'I can see it all now, Hashknife. It's all simple, when yuh can see it. Ain't that fate for yuh?'

'It was his way to die,' said Hashknife thoughtfully.

'That's right, I reckon. Nobody ever thought of it bein' an accident. Let's go and find that horse. I want to take the saddle back to Cañonville for evidence, too. After I explain things to the prosecutin' attorney, he'll have to turn young Lane loose. Now, if we could only discover that Peter Morgan accidentally killed himself.'

'Mebby he butted his head against the stable,' suggested Sleepy, as they rode up through the swale.

'I reckon we'll have to look farther than that,' smiled Hashknife.

They found the carcass of the horse, and Lem verified what Hashknife had told him about the broken shoulder. The reins were still twisted around the left foot of the animal. They fastened the saddle behind the saddle on Lem's horse, and went back to the road, where Lem left them and went back to Cañonville. He was anxious to get Walter Lane out of jail.

It was still early in the afternoon, and they discovered that both of them were almost out of tobacco.

'Might as well head for Mesa City and stock up,' said Hashknife. 'We can get back by supper-time. Might also pick up a few cans of groceries, 'cause I figure Nan's cupboard is jist about cleaned out.'

They found the three boys from the 6 × 6 in town, already a little more than half-drunk, quarreling over a dice game.

'We've done quit the 6 × 6,' said Spike Cahill, 'so yuh don't need to be scared of us. We're plumb neutral now. Old Dave Morgan came out and took charge to-day. In fact he became so damn full of ownership that we pulled out and left him flat.'

'That's what he told us,' said Hashknife.

'Yeah? I suppose he's braggin' about it. I'd

just like to bend him so bad that every time he coughed he'd snag his nose on his own spurs.'

'What became of yore cook out there?'

'Old Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs? Did Morgan say anythin' about him, Hartley?'

'Somethin' about bustin' a safe at the 6 × 6.'

'Uh-huh,' Spike wiped his lips with the back of his hand. 'Well, I dunno. Far be it from me to say he did or didn't. I'm no mind-reader. Dave Morgan found the safe empty, and he kinda intimated that some of us had a hand in the thing. We shore called his bet — and quit. I don't say I wouldn't snag me an *orejano*, but I won't rob no penny-ante safe. Let's have us a drink, tall feller. How's the tenderfoot?'

'He's all right,' laughed Hashknife.

'What's that damn lunatic doin' here, anyway? Nobody knows what he came for. I thought he was a weak sister, and I found m'self flat on m' back. I could almost be friends with a feller who can hit that hard. Let's go and have that drink.'

Hashknife accepted the drink in order to find out a few things from Spike. He wasn't just sure about Spike; so he didn't want to rush matters too strong.

'What are you boys goin' to do now?' asked Hashknife.

'We don't know,' replied Spike. 'We've got to get jobs. I think I'll head south, down into the

Juniper River country. Used to punch cows down there, and I mebby can land a winter job.'

'You've been on the 6 × 6 quite a while, ain't yuh?'

'Two seasons is all.'

'I'm goin' to ask yuh somethin', Cahill,' confidentially. 'You've been in the 6 × 6 ranch-house quite a lot, ain't yuh?'

Spike looked curiously at him, but nodded slowly.

'Yea-a-ah; quite a lot.'

'Are there any Navajo rugs on the floor?'

'Mm-m-m-m. Yeah, I think there is a few.'

'Didja ever notice one that had a lightnin' mark — zigzag streak of white on a black background?'

'Lemme see,' Spike scratched his head thoughtfully. 'I'm not awful sure about that, but it seems to me-e-e that I've seen somethin' like that. Now, I can't swear to it. Mebby Bert or Dell would remember.'

Dell and Bert had settled their quarrel over the dice and were ordering their drink when Spike moved in beside them and propounded the question. They looked solemnly at Spike and wanted to know what in hell he wanted to know for.

'This tall feller asked me,' said Spike humbly. 'I didn't know for sure; so I ask you.'

Bowen and Roddy moved over closer to Hashknife, prompted by curiosity.

'What's the idea?' queried Bowen.

'I can't tell yuh,' smiled Hashknife. 'I just wanted to know, thasall.'

'Uh-huh. We-e-ell,' drawled Bowen, 'I reckon there is.'

'Is it there now?'

'Now, yuh got me guessin', pardner. I reckon it is.'

'Do you remember it, Bert?' asked Spike.

'No,' growled Bert. 'And I'd crave to know what a damn Injun rug has got to do with this drink I jist won off Dell.'

'Yuh didn't win it,' contradicted Dell. 'You was throwin' sizes, Bert. Yuh had four sixes ag'in' my five sixes, on the last horse.'

'I had five sixes and I beat yuh on the throw-off.'

'You had four. On yore last throw, yuh saw that six on the *side* of the dice — not the top. But whatsa use of arguin' with a drunken cowboy? Have a drink, Hartley?'

'I'll have a cigar, Bowen.'

'You know yore own limitations. Their cigars are a lot older than their liquor. Would yuh mind tellin' me what made yuh ask about that rug?'

'I can't tell yuh — yet,' replied Hashknife, examining the ancient sample of a cigarmaker's art, which fairly crumbled between his fingers. 'Yuh

don't happen to know where Napoleon Briggs went, do yuh?'

'If I did, I wouldn't tell,' said Bowen quickly. 'Mebby you been talkin' with Dave Morgan.'

'Mebby I have.'

Hashknife tried to light the cigar, but it was too porous; so he discarded it in favor of a cigarette.

'Did you boys know that Ben Leach was killed accidentally?' he asked.

'Accidentally, hell!' snorted Spike, while the others merely smiled their disbelief.

'He shot himself accidentally,' declared Hashknife, and proceeded to describe just how it happened.

'Well, for gosh sake!' blurted Bert. 'So that's why we never found that gun and horse? Can yuh imagine that?'

'It sounds reasonable,' agreed Bowen. 'Didja work all that out yourself, Hartley?'

'With the aid of the buzzards.'

'I know. By golly, I'm glad we never caught young Lane. We would have lynched him sure.'

'Why don'tcha go ahead and clear the old man?' asked Bert. 'Yuh might prove he hammered himself over the head.'

'Aw, he couldn't 'a' done it,' protested Spike. 'He couldn't rope himself on a horse, Bert.'

'Might 'a' roped himself on first, and left one hand loose.'

'You're a bright pair,' said Bowen disgustedly.

Dave Morgan came in, nodding pleasantly to Hashknife, but ignoring the three cowboys with him. He talked for a few minutes with Jack Fairweather, and they went together to the rear of the saloon, where they entered a private room.

'Morgan's probably takin' over this place,' said Spike. 'He'll be the stud road-runner of the Black Horse River country, I suppose.'

Dell wanted to shake the dice again, and, while they were arguing over the game, Morgan came from the private room. Hashknife stepped away from the bar and met Morgan near the door.

'I ain't had a chance to speak with Miss Lane about takin' that job,' he told Morgan. 'I dunno how she'll feel about it now,' and he told Morgan about the evidence which would release her brother.

'I heard about it,' replied Dave. 'Lem told me about it.'

'Oh, yuh met him, eh?'

'Yeah. Well, if she don't want the job, I'll rustle another cook. You and yore pardner and the kid can take the jobs, can't yuh?'

'Might do that, Morgan. Anyway, I'll talk it over with yuh to-morrow.'

'That's fine. I'm takin' over this place, too.'

'Goin' to run it yourself?'

'Ain't decided yet. I'll see yuh to-morrow.'

Morgan left the saloon, and Hashknife went back to the bar, where Sleepy joined them in a few minutes. He had made their purchases and was ready to go home. The ex-6 × 6 cowboys wanted them to make a night of it, but Hashknife and Sleepy declined.

It was nearing supper-time when they rode away from town, and it was almost dark when they arrived at the ranch. There were no lights in the ranch-house, no sign of any one about the place. When they stabled their horses, they discovered that the two extra saddle horses and riding rigs were missing.

'Betcha Nan and Rex went for a ride,' said Sleepy, as they headed for the ranch-house.

There was no one in the house. They lighted a lamp in the kitchen, and on the table they found a penciled note:

If we miss meeting you, this note will tell you that we decided to ride to Cañonville. May be back to-night. Don't worry.

NAN AND REX

P.S. There's an apple pie in the oven.

'Well, that explains it,' said Sleepy, visibly relieved.

'Uh-huh,' grunted Hashknife. 'I suppose she wanted to see her folks.'

'Can't blame her for that, cowboy.'

'No, I reckon yuh can't. That apple pie in the oven sounds good to me.'

CHAPTER XIII

A SLIDE FOR LIFE

NAN'S decision to go to Cañonville was rather sudden. She wanted to see her father and ask him what he thought of her accepting that job at Morgan's ranch. Rex was of the opinion that she should wait until Hashknife and Sleepy came back, but Nan was rather impulsive. She wanted to go right now.

Together they saddled the horses. Nan wrote the note and left it on the kitchen table, where she knew they would find it.

'We'll probably meet Hashknife and Sleepy between here and Cañonville,' said Nan, 'and they'll ride back with us.'

Rex was not exactly sure of himself in the saddle; so they did not ride fast. His mount was a perfectly gentle horse, but Nan's horse fretted and danced, fighting against the bit. But she was a good rider and handled the horse easily.

Rex showed her where the stage broke down the day he came into the country, and they laughed over the things that had happened to him during his short stay in the cattle country.

'Do you really believe I will ever be a cowboy?'

he asked, as they started up the crooked grades of Coyote Cañon.

'Do you want to be, Rex?'

'I don't know, Nan. When I look at Hashknife Hartley, I do. But when I look at some of the other cowboys, I'm not sure.'

'He's different,' she admitted.

'Yes, he is, Nan. Sometimes I wonder what I am doing here. I don't belong here, and no one realizes it more than I do. If I had what Hashknife calls horse-sense, I — I would — oh, I don't know. I'd like to go somewhere and make a lot of money, and — and then come back here and get you.'

'And get me?' smiled Nan. 'What an ambition!'

'Don't laugh at me, Nan; I'm serious. Ever since that morning when I awoke and saw you looking out through the window, I've had just that ambition.'

'It will be dark before we reach Cañonville,' said Nan, turning in her saddle and looking at the fading sunset.

'You always change the subject, Nan.'

'I suppose I do, Rex. Why not?'

'Well, I can have ambitions, can't I?'

Nan laughed softly. 'I suppose so, Rex. I guess I haven't any. We have moved from pillar to post ever since I can remember, and we have never

stayed in any one place long enough to have any ambition. Dad has always been restless. I'll bet I have gone to more schools in this State than any other person. We'd stay a few months in a place, and then Dad would hear of another range. Then it was a case of pack up and move on. This time he promised me that we would stay.'

'Hashknife and Sleepy always keep moving,' said Rex. 'They have actually killed men, Nan. I don't know how many. I asked Sleepy how many men Hashknife had killed, and he said that he didn't know, because they had lost the complete list. It must have been a great many.'

Nan smiled sideways at Rex, whose expression was serious. She knew cowboys and their well-stretched yarns.

'I asked him why it was they never got hung,' said Rex seriously, 'and he said it was because nobody had ever found any of their victims.'

'I should guess not,' laughed Nan.

Far ahead of them stretched the grades, winding around the rim of the cañon. They could look down on the almost precipitous sides of the cañon, where a few piñon and junipers clung to the sides of the slope. Farther down the tops of larger trees blended with the purple of the depths.

The opposite side of the cañon seemed to be a sheer, rocky wall as far as they could see in both

directions. Coyote Cañon was not an inviting place. Nan had heard her father say that at some remote time an enormous quantity of water had rushed through that cañon, tearing out great holes in the cañon-bed. It was a sanctuary for the lion and wild-cat, where men had never made their trail.

It was the short twilight of the Southwest, which lasts but a few minutes after sundown, as they rounded a point on the high grades. Rex was riding on the outside, when, without any warning, his horse plunged headlong to the ground, almost off the edge of the grade.

Nan's horse whirled and reared, as the hills echoed from the crashing report of a rifle. Without hardly knowing what she was doing, Nan dismounted and ran to Rex. He was trying to sit up, looking dazedly around.

Zowee-e-e-e! Another bullet struck the ground beside Nan and went screaming off across the cañon, while the cliffs echoed back the report of the shot. Rex was getting up. His face was skinned, bleeding, and he was still dazed from the fall.

Another bullet whispered past his ear, and he jerked his head back quickly, as though trying to dodge it. Nan grasped him by the arm, and they both slid over the edge of the grade, while the fourth bullet blinded them with a spray of dust and gravel from the roadbed.

To get below the road level was their only chance — and such a chance! The gravel was loose, sliding. Nan tried to grasp a bush at the edge of the grade, but it slipped from her hand. They were going down the steep slope, unable to check themselves in any way.

Rex was over his daze now, and realized what was happening. He had turned, facing the hill and dropped to his knees, trying to cling to Nan. They were not sliding fast yet. Nan turned a white face toward him, clutching at the sliding gravel with her hands.

'Turn around,' she said hoarsely. 'Sit down and slide.'

He obeyed quickly. They were going faster each moment. Just below them was a small thicket of piñons, and, unless their speed increased, there might be a chance to slide into that thicket of small trees.

Another bullet snapped past them, and the tip of a piñon was severed. Rex glanced back, trying to see the grade, but the angle was too abrupt. He could see their trail, where the sifting gravel was following them. Then a branch lashed him across the face, a piñon trunk sent him spinning sideways, and he was through the thicket. His eyes were filled with sand and tears, but he saw Nan a short distance behind him. She had a piñon

limb in her hands, which had torn off, when she tried to stop.

Up to this point the sliding had not been painful, as it was loose gravel, which, instead of their sliding over it, seemed to go along with them. There was no more shooting now. Rex managed to slow up sufficiently to half-stand, and then to run sideways across the slope to where he could reach Nan.

Her hands were torn from the piñon branches, and there was a welt across her cheek. She was slightly dazed and hardly realized, for a moment, that their slide was over.

'What happened?' she asked foolishly.

'I don't know,' said Rex, clinging with toes and hands to the loose surface, in order to look back up the slope.

They had managed to stop at the edge of a sheer place. Something was coming down the hill toward them. Rex saw it tear through the little thicket above them, fairly knocking down the trees. It was going to pass them at about twenty feet, and, as it came down past them, in a cloud of dust and sand, they saw it shoot over the edge just below them and go hurtling off into space.

'That is my huh-horse!' blurted Rex.

Nan nodded, her lips shut tight.

'How do you suppose it got off the road, Nan?'

'The man who shot at us,' said Nan, choking

back her tears. 'He shoved it off the grade. Oh, what are we going to do? We can't get back, Rex.'

'And we can't stay here, Nan. This stuff is sliding all the time. That horse went over a precipice. If we could only get around to that other slope.'

'Maybe we can.'

Off to the left, about a hundred feet away, was another slope, which seemed to lead around and down past the sheer cliffs. It was their only hope. The ground was slowly moving with them.

They got to their feet and began fighting their way toward this slope, climbing upward, trying to keep away from the abrupt drop into the cañon. It was a terrific effort. It was like running on a treadmill.

With another ten feet to go, Nan would never have made it. She fell to her knees, heading down the slope, but Rex still had strength enough to grasp her by the shoulders and swing her around, when they both went over the edge of the steep slope.

The dry dust and sand filled their eyes and mouths to the point of suffocation, but luckily the rubble was so soft that they dug deeply into it, impeding their progress to such an extent that they were able to stand up, braced against the hill and work their way down.

Rex clung to Nan tightly. At times they would

slip and slide for several feet, but always they were able to keep from pitching headlong. This slide was about two hundred yards long, and they came out in a heavy thicket of fir and small pines, still a long way from the bottom of the cañon.

It was almost dark down there. They could look back up the slope now, and wonder how they ever came down alive. Above them the sky seemed very blue, but, as they sat on a rock and took stock of their injuries, the blue sky faded out and a lone star winked down at them.

Both of them were badly bruised and their clothes torn, but luckily no bones were broken. They were covered with dust and sand, and altogether miserable.

'I think there is water in the bottom of the cañon,' said Nan painfully. 'We must get to water, Rex.'

'Yes,' dully. 'I am numb all over, Nan. I don't feel a bit good.'

'Have you any matches, Rex?'

He felt carefully through his pockets. Rex did not smoke, but, due to the fact that Sleepy was always out of matches, he had been carrying a goodly supply.

'Yes, I have some, Nan.'

'Good! At least we can keep varmints away from us.'

'What is a varmint, Nan?'

'Oh — mountain lions and things like that.'

'Down here? And we have no gun.'

'Perhaps it is lucky we haven't. I'm not much good with a gun, and if you had one I'd be afraid you might shoot me.'

'I suppose that is true, Nan. But do you mean that we are going to spend the night down here?'

'Unless you know of a way out. I don't. I doubt if there is a man in this country who could get out of here at night. We'll just have to make the best of it, and be thankful we are alive. To-morrow, if a lion don't claw us or a rattler bite us, we may find a way out.'

'You are joking, Nan.'

'I'd like to agree with you, Rex. Come on.'

It was difficult traveling over the rocks in the half-light, but they reached the bottom of the cañon with a few extra bruises. There were huge, whitened boulders in the dry bed of the old stream, relics of a day when much water had poured down through Coyote Cañon. From the side of the bank trickled a tiny stream of cold water, and they drank heavily before building a fire.

It was cold down there, and a wind moaned through the tops of the trees. There was plenty of wood, and they soon had a fire burning in the lee of a big, polished boulder. Outside the illumination

of the fire was blackness and the moaning wind. A stone rolled down the slope and crashed through the brush, bringing them both to their feet in a sudden panic.

Rex piled more wood on the fire and they stood together, trying to pierce the darkness.

'I — I guess it — it wasn't anything,' faltered Rex.

Nan sat down against the boulder trying to calm her nerves, while Rex hunched down beside her, poking at the fire with a stick, his ears tuned for the slightest sound.

'I have been wondering who shot at us,' he said nervously. 'Do you suppose they would follow us down here, Nan?'

'Not down here,' she replied. 'Nobody would ever come down here voluntarily.'

'I suppose not, I know I ——'

But Rex did not finish. From just out in the blackness came the sound of a mirthless laugh; a devilish chuckle which caused them to shrink back against the boulder, staring wide-eyed into space.

It was not repeated. After a space of perhaps twenty seconds they looked at each other, as though wondering if the other had heard it. Nan shook her head at Rex. She could not speak.

Slowly Rex got to his feet, knees trembling, his hand on Nan's shoulder.

'My God!' he breathed chokingly.

Just across the fire from them, as though appearing from nowhere, stood a man, the firelight glistening on his face. He wore no hat, and his face was gobby with dirt, swollen, contorted. He was wearing a coat, one sleeve of which had been torn away, along with the sleeve of his shirt, which had once been white, but was now stained and dirty.

He was looking at them in a stony sort of way, hunched forward, one hand thrown up, as though to ward away the heat, and in the other hand was a heavy Colt revolver, cocked.

CHAPTER XIV

SAVED BY CONDENSED MILK

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy did not hurry with their supper, and it was after dark before they began eating. Hashknife was rather thoughtful, and Sleepy noticed him staring at the table-top several times.

'You ain't worryin' about the two kids, are yuh?' he asked.

'Not exactly worryin', Sleepy; but I wish they had waited until we got back.'

'Well, my gosh, there ain't nothin' goin' to hurt 'em.'

'I hope not. Better cut that pie.'

Sleepy took it from the oven and cut two generous slices, which soon disappeared. But even the apple pie did not serve to raise Hashknife's spirits, and Sleepy laughed at him.

'You look like them pictures of Abe Lincoln when yuh get that serious expression,' grinned Sleepy. 'All yuh need is some whiskers and a plug hat.'

Sleepy slid down in his chair and began rolling a cigarette. He was just running his tongue along the edge of the paper, when something hit him square in the face, knocking him over backwards, and he heard the clatter of glass, the thud of a shot.

Hashknife flung himself away from the table, going backwards in his chair, but landed on his hands and knees. His cheek was slightly cut by flying glass from the window, but he did not know it. He sprang to his feet, swept up the rifle, which stood in the corner, and ran through the living-room.

Without hesitation he flung the door open and sprang off the porch. Just out beyond the corral was a horse, going away at a sharp trot, and Hashknife thought he saw a rider on it. He threw up the Winchester and fired twice. The flash of the gun blinded him for a moment, and he was unable to see what had happened, but he could not hear the horse now.

Now he ran back into the house, flinging the rifle aside. Sleepy was still on his back, his feet sticking up over the overturned chair, apparently unconscious.

As quickly as he was able, Hashknife dragged him out of line with the broken window and made an examination. His face was covered with a sticky liquid, and both of his eyes were rapidly turning black. He grunted and sat up.

'What in hell hit me?' he demanded.

'Looks to me as though it was the condensed milk,' said Hashknife thankfully.

'Exploded?'

'Yeah — from a bullet.'

'Bullet?'

'Somebody tried to pot us through the window, Sleepy.'

Sleepy got to his feet, wiping the milk off his face, while Hashknife investigated. The bullet had smashed through the window and ricocheted on the table-top, driving the can of condensed milk square into Sleepy's face, and had struck the opposite wall.

'Look at m' eyes!' wailed Sleepy, touching them tenderly with his fingers. 'Can't hardly see, damn it!'

'You're lucky, cowboy. A few inches higher and you'd be an angel instead of a milkmaid.'

'Well, who in hell fired the shot?'

'I'd like to know. You stay here and I'll see what I can find.'

Sleepy got a basin of cold water and began treating his eyes, while Hashknife went outside. He was back in less than five minutes, and with what little sight Sleepy had left he could see that Hashknife was greatly perturbed.

'What do yuh know?' he asked.

'There's hell to pay, Sleepy. I took a shot at what I thought was the bushwhacker on a horse — and I killed one of Lane's saddle horses — the one Nan said she used. It has got her saddle on it.'

'What do yuh make of that, Hashknife?'

'Somethin' has happened to 'em.'

'Mebby she got throwed. Say, who in hell do yuh suppose took that shot at us?'

'I wish I knew. They almost got you, pardner.'

'They shore condensed me for a moment,' grinned Sleepy. His eyes were swelled almost shut.

'Well, this ain't gettin' us nowhere, Sleepy. You take care of the ranch; I'm headin' for Cañonville.'

'Why don't we both go?'

'Try and see yourself in the glass,' retorted Hashknife, picking up his hat. 'You stay here, cowboy. If anybody comes foolin' around here, use that shotgun on 'em. I'll be back as soon as I can find out somethin'. I may meet 'em on the road.'

But Hashknife did not meet anybody on the road. He forced the tall gray over the Coyote Cañon road as fast as he dared in the dark, but he had the road all to himself. He tried to believe that everything was all right with Nan and Rex, but down in his heart he knew something had gone wrong.

It was late when he drew up at the sheriff's office in Cañonville. He knew Lem slept in his office, and had little trouble in arousing him.

'Hello, yuh old son-of-a-gun,' greeted Lem sleepily. 'Come on in. Wait'll I light the lamp. What brings yuh here this time of the night?'

'Have Nan Lane and Rex Morgan been here this evenin'?'

'No-o-o, I ain't seen nothin' of 'em, Hashknife.'

'Well, they started for here, accordin' to a note they left for us. After we left you, we went to Mesa City, Lem. They must have started out between the time you left us and the time we got back to the ranch. And while we was eatin' supper, somebody shot through the kitchen window and almost got Sleepy. The bullet lifted a can of milk and slammed Sleepy between the eyes with it.

'I ran outside, and I thought I seen a man goin' away; so I shot twice at the object, which turned out to be Nan Lane's saddle horse, still wearin' her saddle. I killed it too dead to kick. Now, what do yuh make of that, Lem?'

'Well, f'r God's sake! Lemme think. Somebody shot through yore window? That's bein' tough, ain't it? And was it the horse Nan rode to-day?'

'There was only two horses in the stable, Lem.'

'What do yuh know? Huh! Well.' Lem picked up his pants and began dressing, his fat face very serious. 'I reckon it's up to us to find out somethin', Hashknife. Where could they go? Looks ridiculous, don't it? Who'd want to harm Nan Lane? Say, I took that evidence up with the prosecutor. He says he'll release young Lane as soon as he has a talk with the judge. What did Nan think about it?'

'We never got a chance to tell her.'

'Tha-a-at's right. What had we ort to do first?

Can't find a damn thing in the dark. Mebby we better ride to Mesa City and see what we can see, eh? There ain't no chance for them two folks to get off the main road between here and the Lane ranch. Are yuh shore they didn't say Mesa City instead of Cañonville?'

'They wrote Cañonville, Lem.'

'Well, if they got here, I never did see 'em. I might inquire around a little.'

'I don't think that would do any good. They'd come here.'

'I could ask Joe Cave. He's livin' at the hotel.'

'But you've been here long enough to have seen 'em, Lem. They must have come here behind yuh, otherwise we would have met 'em on the road between here and the ranch.'

'That's right.'

Lem buckled on his belt, picked up his rifle, and led the way to the stable, where he saddled his horse.

'What do yuh make of young Morgan, Hashknife?'

'Good kid.'

'Iggerant as hell, ain't he?'

'From our point of view, Lem.'

'Uh-huh. I hope he ain't to blame for them disappearin'.'

'Pshaw!' exploded Hashknife. 'He's square as a dollar, Lem. Why, he's civilized.'

'That's the hell of it! If he was our kind, we'd know what to expect. Well, let's hit the high spots, *compadre*.'

'Speed won't get us nowhere, Lem.'

'All right; you lead. I'm the best little follower yuh ever saw.'

They rode away from the stable, just as a passenger train roared through the town. They were obliged to wait until the train had gone past before crossing the tracks. Suddenly Hashknife got an idea.

'Do you know the depot agent very well, Lem?' he asked.

'Shore. Knowed him for a year or so.'

'Let's go over and see him.'

They tied their horses behind the depot and went around to the little waiting-room. The agent was busy with his telegraph instrument, but he finally turned in his chair and nodded to Lem.

'Hyah, sheriff. What's on yore mind?'

'Shake hands with Mr. Hartley, Jim. Hashknife, this is Jim Horton.'

They shook hands.

'You tell him what yuh want, Hashknife,' said Lem.

'I dunno whether yuh can help me or not, Horton. In case a telegram comes for anybody in Mesa City, how do yuh handle it?'

'Mail it to 'em right away.'

'Do yuh keep any record of telegrams?'

'Oh, sure; we keep a copy. Of course we never let anybody ——'

'If it was orders from the sheriff's office?'

Horton grinned. 'Well, that's different, of course.'

'In the last few weeks have you had any telegrams for Peter Morgan?'

'The big cowman who got murdered? Mebby I did. It seems to me I sent one — lemme see.'

He lifted a bulky book to the counter and opened it. The leaves were of yellow tissue, bearing the imprint of telegrams written in copying ink. Swiftly the agent went through the recent imprints. Not many telegrams came to Cañonville.

'There's one,' he said, pointing at it, as he swung the book around for them to read.

Hashknife leaned in close and read:

MRS MORGAN PASSED AWAY SUDDENLY AND WAS BURIED LAST SUNDAY STOP TRACED SON TO DEPOT WHERE HE PURCHASED TICKET TO CAÑONVILLE.

J. E. BLAIR

Lem lifted his head and stared at Hashknife, who was smiling, as he copied the telegram on the back of an envelope.

'What in hell does that mean?' demanded Lem anxiously.

'Looks as though young Morgan was Peter's son, don't it?'

'By golly, it shore does, Hashknife! What made yuh think to come here and look for a telegram?'

'A hunch.'

'I'll be darned. Hunch, eh? Wish I had hunches.'

'What is it all about?' asked Horton wonderingly.

'Didn't you do any wonderin' when yuh got that telegram?' asked Lem.

'I guess I didn't. You see, I don't know anything about Morgan.'

'You didn't know he was a bachelor?'

'No. I've heard of him, but I never knew he didn't have a family; so the telegram didn't mean anything to me.'

'Well, he never had any wife or a son that we ever heard about. The telegram says that his son was headed this way.'

'Did he ever get here, sheriff?'

Lem scratched his head foolishly.

'Well, we dunno yet, Jim. Don't tell anybody about it.'

'Is that all I can do for yuh, gents?' asked Horton.

'Yeah, that's all, I reckon. Thank yuh, Horton.'

'You're welcome.'

They walked out of the depot and mounted their horses.

'We'll just keep this information under our hat, Lem,' said Hashknife as they road away.

'Oh, shore. I may not be worth a damn to find out anythin' but I can keep still about it when somebody else tells me about it.'

CHAPTER XV

THE CAVE MAN

For what seemed hours Nan and Rex stared across the fire at this man. It was Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs, but they did not know him. His closest friends would have had difficulty in recognizing him now. His head seemed to have been battered until it was out of shape. His forehead was swollen over his eyes, giving him almost the appearance of a gorilla, and on one side of his head the scalp had been torn loose, disclosing an ugly wound.

His eyes glittered brightly in the firelight, as he swayed on his feet, moving his head slowly, shifting his eyes from Nan to Rex, as though trying to make up his mind just what to do. Rex and Nan seemed incapable of speech. Neither of them had known Briggs. Suddenly his lips parted and he laughed insanely, disclosing two broken front teeth. Rex started to step forward, but the gun muzzle shifted toward him quickly.

'What 'r yuh doin' here?' he asked gutturally.

'Somebody shot my horse,' said Rex weakly.

'What 'r yuh doin' here?' he repeated, as though he had not heard Rex. 'Keep back! I'll kill yuh. I own this place, and I don't allow nobody here.'

'We'll go away,' said Nan quickly, getting to her feet.

'Woman, eh?'

He laughed foolishly. 'Woman came on my place. Woman and horse meat. Don't move. Woman, horse meat, and them damn buzzards. What 'r yuh doin' here, I asked yuh?'

There was no question that the man was insane; dangerously insane. The fire was dying out now. Unconscious of the danger, Rex reached down to pick up a piece of wood, and a bullet smashed the dirt beneath his knuckles. The report of the heavy cartridge echoed back from the cliffs, and Rex almost fell over backwards.

'I tell yuh I'll kill yuh,' declared Briggs. 'I own this place, and I don't 'low nobody here.'

'Will you let us go away?' asked Nan, hardly speaking above a whisper.

'No! You'd tell somebody where I am. You can't go.'

'We wouldn't tell,' croaked Rex pleadingly.

'You're a liar! You can't go. I run this place. Don't you try to pick up anythin'.'

'Where do you live?' asked Nan. She wanted to change the subject, to get his mind off killing some one.

'Never mind where I live. You'll find out soon enough. That's what they all want to know.

Everybody asks me where I live, but I don't tell. C'mon.'

He backed away from the fire, keeping them covered with the gun.

Away from the firelight the darkness was intense.

'No!' he grunted. 'The woman goes first.'

Even through his twisted brain was a strain of intelligent cunning. He realized that he could not control both of them in the darkness. He moved back closer to Rex, peering at him closely.

'You stay here,' he ordered. 'You move and I'll kill yuh.'

'I won't move,' promised Rex.

'Don't move. I'll come back for you. If you go away, I'll find yuh. You can't get away.'

He grasped Nan by the shoulder and shoved her ahead of him out into the blackness of the cañon. Rex dropped on his knees beside the fire, piling on more wood. His brain was in a whirl. This crazy man was taking Nan away, and he was letting her go.

In an access of fury at himself he flung a stick into the fire, sending up a shower of sparks, and for the first time in his life he cursed openly, bitterly. From far up the cañon came the leering laughter of the crazy Briggs.

Then something snapped in the brain of the young man at the fire, and he ran headlong up the cañon,

bruising himself against boulders, being whipped across the face with branches, falling headlong at times.

He had lost all sense of reason. After a fall he had picked up a club, and now he went sneaking along, alert to every sound, gripping the club in his right hand, his left hand extended ahead of him, feeling out into the darkness.

Gone was all fear of the darkness, of wild animals. Rex Morgan had reverted to the primitive. Another cave man had stolen his woman, and he was going to get her. On and on he went, climbing boulders, stumbling over exposed roots, until he came to a spot where he could go no farther.

In the darkness he discovered that he was at the bottom of what had been an ancient waterfall. There were high banks all around him, but he found a way out. It was a sort of trail up the left bank, twisting between giant boulders.

He reached what seemed to be the cañon level again, and sank back on his haunches to listen. Then he heard voices. They were very indistinct, and he strained his ears. The wind whined among the boulders, drowning out the sound, but he thought he had located it.

Gripping his club tightly, he began working up the slope to the left, under the towering cliffs. It was slow work, this climbing in the darkness. He

slipped and sprawled full length on a sloping rock, losing his club; but got back to his hands and knees and kept going up over the ledges.

Then he saw the flicker of a fire, the scent of burning meat. Pulling himself up to the rim of the rock he looked into a cave. In reality he was in the cave himself, as the ledge above him projected twenty feet farther out over the cañon.

Nan was huddled on the floor near the fire, while Briggs towered over her, bulking huge in the firelight. Their shadows were huge, goblin-like things against the wall of the cave. On the fire sizzled a huge hunk of raw meat, which was sending off a strong odor.

Briggs was talking to Nan, but Rex could not hear what was said. Finally Briggs left her and came shambling past where Rex crouched on the rock, and disappeared in the darkness. Rex slid off the rock and crossed the entrance of the cave to the fire, and Nan looked up at him wonderingly.

'How did you get here?' she asked.

Rex brushed a hand across his eyes and stared back at the entrance, as though seeking an answer to her question.

'I — I just came,' he said, and squatted down beside the fire.

'He has gone after you, Rex.'

'I suppose.'

'He'll come back.'

Rex stared at her dully. 'Very likely,' he said.

'Don't you realize what it means, Rex? The man is crazy. He says he will kill you, because he don't want you here.'

'That meat is burning, isn't it?'

'He said it was horse meat. But don't you understand, Rex? That man will come back and kill you.'

'No, he won't.'

Rex got to his feet and picked up a stone about the size of a baseball, swinging it in his hand to test the weight.

'I'm going to kill him first,' he said flatly, and went back toward the opening of the cave.

He knew just where Briggs would pass in entering the cave; so he climbed up on a slab of sandstone, several feet higher than the level of a man's head, and stretched out flat. He was in the deep shadow, but by lifting his head he could see the fire in the cave, where Nan still huddled. He turned his head and peered over the outer rim of the rock. Something was moving down there, and he could see the dark outline of something.

It came closer, and he decided that it was the crazy man, sneaking back to the cave. Perhaps, thought Rex, he knows I am here, and is trying to surprise me. Inching carefully forward, he swung up his arm and sent the heavy stone crashing down-

ward, where it thudded against some yielding object.

Came a spitting snarl, the rasp of claws on sandstone, and the object vanished down the cañon. He had hit a mountain lion with the stone. Rex realized instantly that he had hit an animal instead of a man, because that snarl never came from a human throat.

But now he was without a weapon of any kind. He slid off the sandstone shelf and went back toward the firelight, trying to pick up another stone. The lion had probably been attracted by the smell of the meat and was stalking the cave.

Rex secured another stone and turned back toward the shelf, when he heard the man coming back, talking to himself. It was too late for him to regain the shelf; so he darted in beside a small ledge, crouching as low as possible.

He heard the scuff of leather soles on the rock, as Briggs came cautiously. Then he saw the huge bulk of the man pass him, going slowly, evidently peering into the cave, trying to see if everything was all right.

Rex straightened up, drew back his arm and flung the stone. But it slipped from his hand and crashed against the wall, far to the right of its victim, and Briggs whirled quickly, grunting with astonishment.

But Rex did not wait to see if he missed. As he

flung the stone, he also flung himself forward, locking both arms around Briggs, and his rush carried enough weight to send Briggs to his knees against the sandstone wall of the cave.

The heavy revolver went spinning across the stony floor, and the two men surged to their feet, only to crash down again, fighting with tooth and nail; fighting silently, as far as their voices were concerned.

Although Briggs was past middle age, he was as strong as any man in the country, and this, added to his insane fury, would have made him more than a match for any professional wrestler in the world. Rex was not particularly strong, but he was fighting for his life, and for the life of Nan Lane, and he clung to Briggs like a burr.

He had his left arm around Briggs's neck, his right locked beneath Briggs's right arm-pit, the while his knees dug into the small of Briggs's back. Briggs managed to get hold of Rex's left ankle with his left hand, but Rex promptly locked his other leg around Briggs's waist, spurring him in the stomache.

Rex's grip around Briggs's neck was shutting off his wind; so he let loose of the ankle, using both hands to tear Rex's arm away from his throat. It gave Rex a chance to release his right arm, but before he could do anything, Briggs had caught his

left wrist with his left hand, reached back with his right, grasping Rex's shoulder, and flung him ten feet away.

Rex landed on one knee, his left arm numb to the shoulder. For several moments Briggs stood there, as though trying to get his balance. Perhaps his disordered brain caused him to forget what was going on for a moment. Rex had got back to his feet now, silhouetted against the light from the fire.

Nan had heard the scuffle and was trying to see what it meant. Then Briggs laughed harshly and started toward Rex, who began backing toward the fire. He did not care to get caught again in those vise-like hands.

Briggs did not hurry. Perhaps he realized that Rex could not escape him, and was playing with him. Nan uttered no sound, as the two men came into the firelight. Rex's shirt had been almost torn from his body, and one cheek was bleeding from a rasping contact with the wall of the cave.

Rex glanced behind him. There was not much farther he could go. He tried to edge to the left, but Briggs blocked him. It was only a matter of moments before he would be caught. Suddenly he remembered the gun.

'Nan — the gun!' he panted. 'Near the entrance — he dropped it, Nan!'

Briggs shifted his eyes to Nan. He was close

enough to stop her if she started. But as he shifted his eyes Rex sprang to the side of the cave, trying to get past Briggs.

But he was not successful. As quick as a flash, Briggs reached out and caught part of Rex's torn sleeve. Rex tried to back away, but the cave wall was too close. Briggs was slightly crouched, and as he yanked Rex toward him, the young man struck with every ounce of his body in a sweeping uppercut, which caught Briggs flush on the point of the chin.

Briggs's head snapped back, his heel caught on a stone, and he fell flat on his back, his head fairly bouncing from the sandstone floor.

Rex fell to his knees from the force of the blow, his right arm and hand paralyzed for the moment, but he got to his feet and staggered out to the entrance, where he found the gun. Nan was sitting against the wall, crying, as he came back, and he looked at her curiously. Briggs had not moved.

Rex picked up some scattered wood and threw it on the fire.

'This is a better place than we were, Nan,' he said calmly. 'At least we have a roof over our heads.'

She took her hands from her face and stared at him. It was such a ridiculous thing to say after what had happened.

'Rex, are you all right?' she whispered.

He looked at her and grinned.

'You're damn right! Isn't that what Hashknife would say?'

'Oh, I'm glad, Rex. I — I don't know what to say. It is all like an awful dream. I thought you had lost your mind, too.'

'Me?' Rex blinked some of the blood out of his eye. 'Perhaps I did, Nan. I don't remember much about it. But I was sane enough to realize that he would kill me. I guess I missed him with the stone. I wonder if I killed him.'

Cautiously he examined Briggs. His heart was beating, but he was unconscious. The blow on the jaw, together with striking his head on the stone, had given him a double knockout.

'He's not dead, Nan. I'm glad of that.'

'But what will we do when he wakes up, Rex?'

'That depends on him entirely. If he still persists in trying to be boss of this place, I shall shoot him with his own gun.'

'Let me see that gun, Rex.'

He handed it to her and she looked it over carefully.

'Every cartridge has been fired,' she said wonderingly.

'You mean, it is of no value?'

'Not unless he has more cartridges in his pockets.'

Briggs was wearing no belt, and a search of his pockets failed to show any ammunition.

'Give me the gun,' said Rex. 'I can bluff with it.'

'But he must know it is empty, Rex.'

'If he did — why was he carrying it? You try and get a little sleep, Nan; I'll watch him. If he wasn't born in this cañon, there must be a way out, and we'll find it. That meat don't make a very pleasant odor, does it?'

'He was cooking it for me,' said Nan. 'He said it was horse meat. He picked it up off the dirty floor and threw it on the fire — for my supper.'

'He may be hungry when he wakes up,' grinned Rex.

It was well after midnight when Hashknife and the sheriff reached Mesa City. The town was in darkness, except the Oasis saloon, where they found only Dave Morgan and Jack Fairweather, discussing business, while the bartender rested his elbows on the bar as he perused a dog-eared book.

Morgan welcomed the newcomers heartily.

'C'mon and have a drink. You fellers ridin' kinda late, ain't yuh?'

'Kinda,' admitted Lem, as they lined up at the bar. 'What's new, Dave?'

'Nothin' much. I'm takin' over this saloon, Lem.'

'Yea-a-ah? Oh, shore. You goin' to stay here, Jack?'

Fairweather shook his head slowly.

'You goin' to run this place yourself, Dave?'

'I don't hardly think so, Lem. May sell it after while.'

'Where's the boys from the 6 × 6?' asked Hashknife?

'Gone to bed, I reckon. Got pretty well loaded, all of 'em.'

'You boys just rode in from Cañonville?' asked Fairweather.

Lem nodded, lifting his glass.

'Here's how, gents.'

They drank together.

'You goin' to the ranch with me, Lem?' asked Hashknife.

'I think I'll stay here, Hashknife. I'll get a room at the hotel, and be out to yore place early.'

'All right.'

Hashknife went back to his horse, mounted and headed for the ranch, while the three men at the bar had another drink.

'You ain't takin' an after-midnight ride just for yore health, are yuh, Lem?' queried Morgan.

The sheriff rolled a cigarette, shaping it carefully, before replying:

'Nan Lane and that young tenderfoot started for

Cañonville late this afternoon, and they never arrived.'

'Never arrived? What do yuh mean, Lem?'

'Never arrived, thasall. Her horse came back to Lane's ranch, and Hashknife killed it.'

'Killed what — the horse?'

'Shore.'

'What for?'

'Thought there was a man on it — the man who had just shot through the window at them.'

'Well, I'll be damned!' exploded Dave. 'What's this all about?'

'Search me,' replied Lem wearily, as he lighted his cigarette.

'Did either of 'em get hit, Lem?'

'No-o-o, not exactly. The bullet hit their can of milk, and the can hit Stevens between the eyes.'

'Can yuh imagine that? And you say that Miss Lane and the tenderfoot never got to Cañonville?'

'So far as we know, they never did.'

'But where are they?'

'Dave,' said Lem seriously, 'I'm no mind-reader. I dunno a damn thing about it. I'm follerin' Hartley, thasall. He says he's got a hunch — and that's more'n I've got. Let's have one more drink.'

The bartender served them and they drank silently.

'Dave, did you ever hear Pete say anythin' about havin' a woman?' asked Lem.

'About havin' a woman?'

'Yeah — a wife.'

'Where didja ever get that idea, Lem?'

'Oh, I jist wondered.'

'Funny ideas you get, Lem. Did you ever hear of him havin' a wife?'

'Nope.'

'I never did,' said Fairweather. 'I don't think he ever did, unless he was married before he came to this country.'

'Whatever put that idea in yore mind?'

'Oh, I dunno. Mebby it was that tenderfoot. His name's Morgan, and he came here tryin' to find out who sent a check to his mother. It came from Mesa City, he says.'

'He's crazy,' laughed Dave. 'Anyway, he'd have a hell of a time provin' anythin'. His mother's dead and Pete's dead, and how in hell could he prove anythin'? Let's have another drink.'

'I guess you're right, Dave. No, thanks. I've had enough. Better grab a little sleep.'

'What does Hartley think about it, Lem?'

'Well, he don't say much, except when I get an idea, and then he shows me where I'm all wrong. If I had his brains I wouldn't be sheriff of no damn county, I'll tell yuh that much.'

Lem left the saloon and took his horse to the livery-stable.

Hashknife rode straight back to the ranch and stabled his horse. Sleepy was still awake and anxious to know what Hashknife had found out; so he came down to the stable.

'But where can they be?' wondered Sleepy.

'I'm shore stuck,' said Hashknife gloomily. 'This is the worst danged case I ever worked on. I can't seem to get goin'. But, by golly, I'm ——' Hashknife hesitated. The moon was high up over the hills, illuminating the old buildings and corrals.

Hashknife walked away from Sleepy and stopped beside the corral fence, only a few feet away.

The Navajo rug was not on the fence.

'It was there when we came in this evenin',' said Sleepy. 'I remember seein' it, Hashknife.'

'I remember it, too, Sleepy. Let's go to bed.'

'I used some raw meat on my eyes,' offered Sleepy. 'I can see clearer than I could.'

'I can see better now, too,' said Hashknife, meaningly. But Sleepy did not question him.

CHAPTER XVI

HASHKNIFE SINGS A SONG

Joe Cave, deputy sheriff, was very drunk. He leaned on a saloon bar in Cañonville, and gazed gloomily about the place, where only a bartender polished glassware, and a swamper busied himself with mop and water-bucket.

It was too early in the morning for much activity. In fact, it was rather out of the ordinary for any one to be drunk that early in the morning. Joe's tow-colored hair had not been brushed, and he looked as though he had slept in his clothes. His thin lips parted over his prominent front teeth, known as 'buck-teeth,' as he indulged in a foolish grin.

'Whazzamatter 'round here?' he demanded.

The bartender studied him gravely. He hated to see a man drunk so early in the morning, but it was really none of his business, of course.

'I don't see anything the matter,' he replied shortly.

'Zasso?' Joe yawned foolishly. He was wearing a once yellow shirt, a nearly red muffler around his scrawny neck, and his overalls were so tight that one knee had split over a too prominent knee-cap. Joe's boots were run-over on the outside of the

heels, causing him to be knock-kneed. He wore a holstered gun, and the loops of his belt were full of cartridges.

Failing to strike up a conversation, Joe left that saloon and went down the street to another place, where he found conditions much the same.

'Where's the sheriff?' asked the bartender.

'Dunno. Went away last night.'

'And so you went and got drunk, eh? Lem will jist about kick yuh off the job when he comes back.'

'Zasso? Huh! Let 'im kick. I'm damned if I like thish job. Nawthin' to do but feed pris'ners. T' hell with it. Gimme a drink.'

Joe got his drink and went to the next saloon. It seemed that he was making the rounds, and still going strong, when Hashknife, Sleepy, and the sheriff rode in and went to the office. The office and jail were in the same building, and in fact the sheriff's office was the main entrance to the jail.

Sleepy's eyes were still of a decidedly mauve hue, but the swelling was gone and he was able to see. Lem had come to the ranch at daylight, and the three of them had headed for Cañonville. They had tried to read the signs along the Coyote Cañon road, but the ground was so hard that they were unable to distinguish one track from another.

They entered the office, which was unlocked, and Lem swore roundly when he did not find Joe Cave

there. It was against the rules to leave the place unlocked. Lem opened the barred door at the rear of the office and went down the narrow corridor between the cells.

Old Paul Lane called a cheery good-morning to him, and his son wanted to know how soon he was to be turned loose.

'I hope to get yuh out to-day, son. How's everythin'?'

'All right, if we had some breakfast.'

'Ain't yuh had no breakfast yet? Where's Joe?'

'He ain't been in here this mornin'. I think he came to the office, but he didn't come in here.'

'Well, that's a fine deal, folks. I'll get yore grub right away.'

Lem came back to the office and told them to hold down the office while he went to the restaurant.

'Go in and talk to 'em,' he said. 'They been askin' about yuh. But don't mention anythin' about Nan bein' missin.'

Old Paul Lane shook hands with them through the bars, and the son thanked Hashknife for what he had done to secure evidence that he did not shoot Ben Leach.

'We been wonderin' why Nan didn't come to see us,' said the old man wistfully.

'She's been awful busy,' said Hashknife quickly. 'Keeps her busy cookin' for three of us.'

'I imagine that's right, Hartley.'

'Well, I'll soon be out,' said Long Lane thankfully. 'You ain't been bothered with any of the 6×6 outfit, have yuh?'

'They've quit the 6×6. Dave Morgan has taken charge of the ranch.'

'The hell he has!'

'And of the Oasis saloon, too.'

'I've been worryin' about Nan,' confessed the old man. 'But Lem says she's safe as long as you boys are with her. I'm shore much obliged to both of yuh. How about the tenderfoot?'

'Oh, he's still alive,' smiled Hashknife, wondering down in his heart if this was the truth.

'He's lucky,' smiled Lane. 'He done me a good turn — two of 'em. It's funny what a green kid will do thataway.'

'I was just wonderin' why Joe Cave didn't bring yuh any breakfast,' said Hashknife.

'I dunno. Usually brings it about eight o'clock. He was kinda snappy last night when he brought our supper. Somebody rubbed him the wrong way yesterday.'

'Yeah?'

'I think so. We didn't hear much of it, because the door was almost shut, but there was some kind of an argument.'

'Who was he arguin' with?' asked Hashknife.

'We dunno, but we heard Joe say, "Well, don't blame me. That was yore fault," and after a few moments he said, "By God, that was the agreement, and you better stick to it."

'Then there was quite a while that we can't hear anythin', except a word once in a while, but before they quit talkin', we heard Joe say, "That's the way I'm goin' to work it, and you better stick to yore word."

'Afterwards, when Joe brought in our supper, he was mad about somethin', and wouldn't talk to us.'

'Was he arguin' with Lem?' asked Hashknife.

'I dunno who the other person was.'

A few minutes later Lem brought in their breakfast, and while they were eating Joe Cave came to the office. He leaned against the side of the doorway and leered at the men in the corridor.

Lem walked out to him, looked him over carefully, his face registering disgust.

'Drunk as a boiled owl, eh?'

'Whazzamatter with you?' grunted Joe.

'What's the matter with me? I'll tell yuh what's the matter with me — I'm through with you, Joe.'

Lem reached over and unpinned the star from Joe's vest, while Joe looked at him owlishly.

'Go and sober up,' said Lem coldly. 'And then come back here and I'll give yuh an order on the county for yore salary.'

'Fired, eh?' queried Joe.

'Yore damn right! I don't want a drunken deputy around here, forgettin' to feed the prisoners and leavin' the jail unlocked. Get away from here, before I flatten yore nose.'

'A-a-a-aw right.'

Joe surged away from the doorway and went to the edge of the sidewalk, where he balanced drunkenly for several moments, and then headed his erratic way toward the livery-stable.

Lem snorted with disgust and turned from the doorway, but Hashknife watched him disappear through the wide doors of the stable.

'Gone after his horse?' asked Hashknife.

'He'll probably head for Mesa City, the drunken bum,' said Lem.

Hashknife stepped outside, but turned to Lem and Sleepy.

'Wait here for me,' he said quickly, and hurried out to his horse.

Lem and Sleepy came to the door and watched Hashknife ride out of town, going north.

'What in hell struck him so sudden?' wondered Lem.

'I dunno,' grinned Sleepy. 'He's thataway, Lem.'

About five minutes later Joe Cave came from the stable, riding a chunky roan gelding. He swayed

drunkenly in his saddle as he rode up the main street of the town, also heading north.

Lem was carrying the breakfast dishes back to the restaurant when Hashknife rode back to the front of the office. He did not explain where he had been nor why he had gone, but, as he waited for Lem to come back from the restaurant, Sleepy heard Hashknife humming:

I know a girl down Pecos wa-a-ay,
And I'm goin' to marry her some da-a-ay.
Her pa's in jail and can't get bail,
They rode her ma out of town on a ra-a-ail.
Her lips are red and her hair is black,
She shot the sheriff in the ba-a-ack.
Oh, how my heart for her does pi-i-ine,
'Cause she's my little clingin' vi-i-ine.

And Sleepy knew the symptoms. It was not often that Hashknife sang. He was not at all musical. Just now he was deadly serious, and it is doubtful if he realized that he was singing.

'Feelin' good, cowboy?' asked Sleepy.

Hashknife looked at him quickly.

'Yeah, I feel pretty good, Sleepy.'

Lem came back from the restaurant. He didn't ask Hashknife where he had been.

'Get on yore horse,' said Hashknife. 'We're goin' to Mesa City.'

They mounted and rode away after Lem had

locked the office door. At the upper end of the street they met Bunty Smith, and Lem drew up his horse.

'Goin' to be here all day, Bunty?' he asked.

'Shore am, Lem.'

'Here's the key to my office. If I ain't back by five o'clock, I wish you'd feed my prisoners, Bunty.'

'Glad to do it, Lem. What do yuh know?'

'I don't know a damn thing, Bunty. See yuh later.'

They rode back along the mesa to the Coyote Cañon grades, riding swiftly, until they started climbing. It was a long, slow climb to where the grades flattened out around the cañon. They met the stage coming from Mesa City. The driver was a man from south of Cañonville. He nodded pleasantly, as they crowded their horses against the inner bank to let the stage pass.

'Joe Cave used to drive stage, didn't he?' asked Hashknife.

'For a long time,' replied Lem. 'Been here a long time. Used to work for the 6 × 6. Worked for the Flying M, too. I thought he'd make a good deputy, but I was wrong. Good shot, Joe is. I've seen him shoot. Fast with a gun.'

Lem spoke jerkily. He was too fat to ride fast. Suddenly Hashknife drew up his horse and looked down into the cañon. A flock of perhaps fifty

buzzards were circling below them; floating without apparent effort. They could look down on their backs from the grade. They were apparently keeping about the same level.

'Quite a flock of buzzards,' observed Lem. 'Probably a lion killed a deer down there, and they want their share. Lots of lions down there, Hashknife. Rocks full of 'em. Notice the way them buzzards act? Probably the lion chased 'em away.'

'Uh-huh,' grunted Hashknife. 'It's a wonder that deer would go down in that cañon, Lem.'

'Water. They probably come from out on the mesa. Not very much water for 'em out there. Hard trip, I reckon. I never been in the cañon. Probably a way in, if yuh know where to look.'

'Probably.'

They rode on toward Mesa City.

CHAPTER XVII

BUZZARDS

THAT night was years long to Nan and Rex. She slept fitfully, but Rex did not sleep at all. Briggs had not moved. At times he groaned softly, and several times he babbled incoherently. There was plenty of wood, and Rex kept the fire going briskly.

It was fully daylight before Rex moved from the fire. He was stiff and sore in every joint. His left shoulder pained him greatly, and his right hand was badly swollen. Nan followed him out of the mouth of the cave. She limped as badly as he, and together they stood on the sandstone ledge, looking up at the sunlight on the high peaks.

'It won't shine down here much before noon,' she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'This cañon is so deep that the sun doesn't reach it quickly.'

Rex nodded gloomily. 'What a night! And what next? I'm so hungry I could almost eat that piece of burned horse meat.'

'Same here,' Nan tried to smile. 'But we'll have to go without food, I suppose. Which way was that spring?'

'Down there,' Rex pointed to the right. 'I wonder if my old hat will hold water? I believe it will, Nan. You stay here and I'll bring you some.'

He made his way down among the boulders, sliding the last few feet to the bottom of the cañon, where he picked up a sizable club. His steps made little sound in the yielding sand, as he made his way down the bottom to where he circled the big boulder, and where they had built their fire.

Clustered around the little spring were dozens of quail, getting their morning drink. Rex did not know what they were, except that they were birds, and birds meant food. Perhaps they had never before seen a human being, because they merely squatted and looked at him. With a side swing of his hand he flung the club into them, killing three and sending the rest in a whirring, curving flight down the cañon.

He secured his birds, filled his hat with water, and started on his return journey to the cave. Nan had dressed and cooked many quail, and she fairly danced with joy at the sight of the three birds.

'I didn't know what they were,' confessed Rex. 'But they looked good to eat, so I hit them with a club.'

Nan skinned the birds and they went back into the cave to build up the fire. Briggs had not moved yet, and Rex was afraid he was dead, but he muttered brokenly, as Rex leaned over him.

He did not look so formidable now; more like an oldish man who had been badly mistreated. It

seemed as though his head had been battered until it was all out of shape.

'He is wearing a dress shirt,' said Rex. 'Isn't it queer for a man down here to be wearing a stiff-bosom shirt? Did you ever see him before, Nan?'

'No, I never have. See if you can find a couple of green sticks, Rex; about a yard long and as big as your finger, to broil these quail on.'

'But what are we going to do with this man, Nan? He's in awful bad shape. Shouldn't we tie him up, or something?'

'I don't know, Rex. We haven't any ropes. Oh, I don't think he can hurt anybody. He's just an old man.'

Rex secured the sticks and came back to the entrance of the cave, where he stopped and looked at the sky. The buzzards were coming for their breakfast; a whole cloud of them, zooming down, like a great fleet of black aeroplanes. Rex called Nan to the entrance to watch the birds. Some of them sailed within a few yards of them, croaking harshly. One tried to alight on the sandstone shelf, where Rex had wasted his stone on a lion, but caught sight of the two human beings, and went away with a great flapping of wings.

Their objective seemed to be just across the cañon from the cave.

'Horrid, dirty things!' exclaimed Nan. 'Always looking for carrion.'

'I suppose,' sighed Rex. 'Still, they might be our salvation, Nan. I remember what Hashknife said to me the night we found that horse. He said, "Sometimes it's a good thing to follow the buzzards. You never can tell what you might find."'

'But do you suppose he might see the buzzards down here?'

'He might see them as they come down, Nan. He'll know to-day that we never reached Cañonville, and he will start a search.'

'Oh, I hope so, Rex. But after breakfast we'll see if there isn't a way out of here. Come on and help cook it.'

They each ate a half-cooked quail. Without any seasoning it was far from delicious, but they ate it and pronounced it good.

'I think you are a very brave girl, Nan,' said Rex. 'In fact, you are rather wonderful in every way, but you've got a lot of burned quail on your nose and a black smudge on one cheek. I suppose I'm a sight. But I don't really care, do you?'

'I don't care how you look, Rex.'

'Well, that's fine. Now, I think we better look around and see if there isn't a way out.'

They worked their way down through the brush and crossed the bottom of the cañon above the cave,

where they were able to climb to a wide shelf. It was here that they disturbed the buzzard host, and they went flapping and croaking their way up the side of the cliffs, only to soar in vast circles, halfway up the height of the cañon, watching with their keen eyes for those two human beings to disappear.

It was this flight of buzzards that Hashknife, Sleepy, and Lem saw from the grades.

'They were eating a horse!' exclaimed Nan. 'Why, your horse never fell this high up the cañon, Rex.'

They walked over and inspected the almost obliterated carcass of a horse, which still bore a saddle. It had been a roan horse, and a strip of the skin still bore the brand of the 6 × 6.

'That was one of Peter Morgan's horses,' declared Nan. 'But how in the world did it get down here?'

Rex looked critically up the side of the sheer hillside.

'It surely didn't walk down,' he replied. 'I think it must have come down like my horse did — end over end.'

'Well, I don't like the odor,' said Nan finally. 'Let's see if we can't go down the cañon.'

In the meantime Hashknife, Sleepy, and Lem rode on to Mesa City. Spike Cahill and Bert Roddy

met them at the hitch-rack, and from their general appearance they were not feeling as good as they had the evening before.

'What's all this talk about Miss Lane and the tenderfoot disappearin'?' asked Spike. 'Lotsa folks have been talkin' about it, and we want it straight.'

Lem explained as well as he could.

'Ain't showed up yet?' Bert Roddy shook his head painfully.

'Not yet, Bert.'

'Well, I'll be damned! Whatcha suppose became of 'em, Lem?'

'Nobody knows.'

'Did Joe Cave show up here?' asked Hashknife.

'About an hour ago,' said Spike, spitting dryly. 'Quit his job, didn't he?' looking at Lem.

'I fired him,' said Lem.

'I told yuh!' crowed Bert. 'Didn't I offer to make yuh a bet, Spike? I said that Lem canned him, didn't I?'

'A-a-aw, don't brag; yuh make my head ache.'

'Where's Joe now?' asked Hashknife.

'Gone out to the Flyin' M. Dave Morgan hired him, and sent him right out to the ranch. Dave needs men pretty bad. He even offered to take us back ag'in, didn't he, Bert?'

'Shore did. And you tell 'em what I told him, Spike.'

'Aw, it wasn't so damn smart. We need the job.'

'Not for that sidewinder. He jist the same as accused us of openin' the safe at the 6 × 6. I may be a thief, but I don't like to have it told before my friends.'

'That's right; he did insult us, Bert. I'm glad yuh said what yuh did to him. But' — he turned to Lem — 'what are yuh doin' toward findin' the lost folks?'

'Not a thing — yet.'

They all walked over to the Oasis, where they found Dave Morgan and several more men.

'What's the latest news?' asked Morgan.

They were obliged to tell him that there was nothing new.

'You know this country pretty well, don't yuh, Morgan?' asked Hashknife.

Dave Morgan smiled faintly, fingering his watch-chain.

'I ought to,' he said. 'I've been here a long time.'

'Ever been down in the middle of Coyote Cañon?

Morgan blinked quickly, thoughtfully.

'No, I never have, Hartley.'

'Do yuh know if there's a trail down there?'

'I've never heard of any.'

'I never have either,' said Spike. 'Why, that

damn thing is straight up and down. Talkin' about it makes me thirsty; so we better have a drink. The 6 × 6 owes me some money, anyway.'

'And you're goin' to collect it over the bar, eh?' queried Dell Bowen.

'Aw, don't preach. You spent part of yours last night.'

'What about a trail into Coyote Cañon?' asked Morgan.

'I'd like to go down there,' replied Hashknife.

'You think there's somethin' down there?' asked Spike.

'About a hundred buzzards,' smiled Sleepy, accepting a glass from the bartender.

'Buzzards, eh? Somethin' dead, eh?'

'No, they go down there to eat brush,' said Bert sarcastically.

'My Gawd, you're comical,' said Spike admiringly. 'The only thing that keeps yuh off the stage is the fact that yuh can't drive, and they wouldn't trust yuh with the money-box.'

'Nobody interested in yore comedy, Spike,' assured Bowen. 'We want to know more about Coyote Cañon. Hartley, are yuh serious in wantin' to go down there?'

'I'm goin' down,' declared Hashknife.

'Yuh don't suppose that Nan Lane and that fool kid are down there, do yuh?'

Hashknife studied his glass of liquor for a moment.

'Bowen,' he said slowly, 'I don't know. But there's no other place to look. They never got to Cañonville; they never came home. Nan's horse came back. They either went up or down, and I'm bettin' they went down.'

'But why should they, Hartley?'

'Who knows? I'm playin' the buzzards, Bowen.'

'Uh-huh,' thoughtfully. 'Well, it's a good bet. We'll go with yuh, cowboy. I don't know any trail down there, but we'll find one. It's worth a try. When do we start?'

'Right now.'

'Saddle up!' snorted Spike, sending his glass spinning down the bar. 'C'mon.'

'You might get in off the mesa on the lower end,' called Dave Morgan. 'They tell me the deer come in that way.'

'All right, Dave — thanks,' replied the sheriff.

The three cowboys hurried to the livery-stable, where they saddled their horses. Hashknife, Sleepy, and Lem joined them, and the six men rode out of town together. Lem and Hashknife rode knee-to-knee.

'We better try the cañon jist south of the Lane place,' called Bowen. 'It ain't so damn high there.'

'Suits me,' agreed Lem heartily. He had little

hopes of ever getting to the bottom of the cañon, no matter where they tried a descent.

A quarter of a mile away from town, Hashknife halted them.

'Boys, I want yuh to do me a little favor,' he said. 'Go right ahead and try to get down the cañon.'

'What's the idea, Hashknife?' queried Lem wonderingly.

'I can't tell yuh yet, Lem. It's just a hunch. I'm turnin' back here.'

'Let him go,' said Sleepy quickly. 'It's all in the game.'

'All right,' agreed Lem, holding out his hand. 'Good luck, Hashknife.'

They swung their horses around and rode swiftly southward, while Hashknife went back toward Mesa City again. Just outside the town he halted his horse behind a thicket of mesquite, and dismounted.

He had not been there over five minutes when Dave Morgan rode past, his horse traveling at a swinging walk. As far as Hashknife knew, Morgan was merely heading for the 6×6 ranch. But as soon as he passed a turn in the road, Hashknife mounted and followed him.

For possibly half a mile farther Morgan rode slowly, but finally forced his horse to a gallop. Hashknife kept far enough behind him so that

Morgan would not see nor hear him, and from a slight elevation he saw Morgan swing to the 6×6 road.

Hashknife swore under his breath, but followed, and it was with a great deal of satisfaction that he saw Morgan leave the road, possibly a quarter of a mile from the forks, and travel south down a brushy swale.

It was rather difficult for Hashknife to follow without being seen now, but he was obliged to take a chance, in order to keep Morgan in sight. Morgan did not look back, but seemed intent on his destination.

It was a little over a mile from where Morgan left the road to the rim of Coyote Cañon, and Hashknife was not over two hundred yards off to the left of him, shielded by a mesquite thicket, when Morgan reached the rim.

For several minutes Morgan sat his horse, scanning the cañon, as though satisfying himself that no one was in sight. Hashknife was a little afraid that the five men farther down the cañon might interfere with things, but finally Morgan, evidently satisfied, rode his horse over the rim of the cañon, cutting in between two live-oaks, and disappeared.

Hashknife rode cautiously to the rim, behind the oaks, and dismounted. Here were the marks of Morgan's horse in the loose earth, and for quite a

distance down the slope he could see where the horse had sidled along the steep slope.

Calmly he rolled and smoked a cigarette. He was not in such a hurry now. If Morgan could get down — he could. And he did not want to try the descent while there was danger of Morgan's hearing him come down. Finally he tightened his cinch, mounted, and followed Morgan.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN IN THE BLACK MASK

Nan and Rex wandered down the cañon below where they had first entered it, but were unable to find a way out. After a supreme effort they were able to climb back over the rocks to where the slide ended, but were unable to go any farther.

'It doesn't look very promising,' said Rex wearily.

Nan sat down on a rock, tired out from the climb. She realized better than Rex did what they were up against. Unless help came to them, they were doomed to starvation in the bottom of Coyote Cañon. She knew that it was only through a great piece of luck that Rex had been able to kill those quail.

'If we even had a gun,' she said helplessly. 'Perhaps they could hear the echo of it.'

'But there must be a way out,' insisted Rex. 'It seems to be an impassable pocket, but there must be a way. I almost wish we were buzzards,' he said. 'They are able to fly out with scarcely any effort.'

'They are not the only buzzards in this country,' said Nan.

'You mean — human buzzards, Nan?'

'Yes. Whoever shot your horse must know we

are down here. They don't know whether we are alive or dead. How did the crazy man get down here, I wonder? That must be his horse.'

'Yes, it is all very queer. I wonder if he is still alive? Perhaps he knows a way out, Nan. It seems a brutal thing to leave him up there alone in that cave. But what can we do? At least, he is unconscious, and does not seem to be suffering. But I wish he would wake up sane again, because he *might* know a way out.'

'He wouldn't know. I guess we better go back to the cave and gather a supply of wood. All we can do is to pray that some one will look down here for us.'

They went back to the bottom of the cañon and had a drink at the little spring. A copper-colored rattler, stretched out on the top of a boulder, waiting for the sunshine, looked them over with beady eyes as they went past. They did not see the snake, and the snake was too torpid from the cold to sound a warning.

They climbed up from the bottom of the cañon near the old waterfall, and twisted their way around the huge boulder. Nan was in the lead, and, as she circled an outcropping of sandstone, she cried out sharply and stepped back, bumping Rex sideways.

A man was standing against the sandstone, covering them with a rifle, and so close was he that Nan's elbow struck the barrel of the rifle as she jerked

back. Her first impression was that it was the crazy man, but a second glance dissipated this idea.

The man was masked with a big bandanna handkerchief, with jagged eye-holes, and his slouch hat was pulled low over his forehead. For several moments he did not move or speak. Rex put his arms around Nan, and tried to draw her behind him.

'Don't move,' warned the man harshly.

'Who are you?' demanded Rex.

'Ne'mind who I am. Keep yore hands up and foller me.'

He backed slowly to the open hillside below the cave, which was not visible from there. Rex had shoved the empty revolver inside the waist-band of his trousers, and now the man stepped over and yanked it away. A quick glance showed him that the gun was empty.

'Where'd yuh git that?' he asked.

'I — I found it,' lied Rex.

'Uh-huh.'

The man flung it far off down the cañon.

'How did you git down here?' he asked.

Rex explained how they happened to be there.

'Yuh came all the way down that slide, eh?'

'It was quite a slide,' agreed Rex. 'Now, I hope you will show us the way out.'

'Yuh hope so, do yuh? Who shot yore horse up there?'

'We haven't any idea.'

'Anybody gunnin' for yuh?'

'I don't know why they should.'

Nan noticed that the man had a lariat wrapped around his waist, and now he began unwrapping it.

'We just want to find the way out of here,' said Rex.

'Thasso?' The man seemed amused. He shifted his gaze to Nan.

'Set down on the rock!' he snapped harshly. 'Set down there and set still.'

He shook the last coil of the rope loose, catching the *hondo* and quickly making his loop. Neither of them had any idea of what he was intending to do. He flipped the twist out of the loop, and with a jerk of his wrist he flung the loop over Rex's shoulders, yanking it tight. Rex stumbled forward, his arms cinched to his sides, and the man kicked his feet from under him, throwing him heavily.

'Stay there, damn yuh!' he snarled. He gave Nan a sharp glance. She had jumped to her feet now, as though intending to help Rex.

'You stay put,' warned the man. 'Set down there!'

Nan sank back on the rock and watched the man deftly hog-tie Rex. He knew ropes, and in a few moments Rex was completely helpless.

'I reckon that'll hold you,' said the man.

'But what has he ever done to you?' asked Nan. 'Why are you tying him up? He never harmed you.'

'Who in Hell's doin' this? Keep yore face out of it.'

'But why are you tying him up?' persisted Nan. 'He never harmed you. All we want is a chance to get out of here.'

She left the rock and came close to him. He watched her through the jagged slits in the handkerchief.

'Keep away from me,' he growled. 'I never hit no woman. Never thought a man ort to hit a woman. But I got to protect myself.'

'Oh, I'm not going to fight with you,' wearily. 'I just want to explain things.'

'Yeah? You set down. I've gotta figure out somethin'.'

'But won't you let him go — please?'

'Hell, I can't! Set down. If I had another rope, I'd tie you, too.'

Nan sat down while the man perched on a convenient boulder. Rex was lying on his side, facing them. He was still bewildered, but unable to move. The man in the mask rolled a cigarette, but discovered that he would have to move his mask aside in order to smoke, and tossed the unlighted cigarette aside.

He made no mention of the cave, and Nan de-

cided that he had not discovered it. For possibly five minutes they sat there silently. At times the man leaned forward, rubbing his face through the handkerchief, as though unable to arrive at a decision. At times he turned his head and looked at the buzzards, which were circling about. Finally he got to his feet, walked over and looked at the knotted rope, and then turned to Nan.

'I'm goin' to take yuh out,' he said.

'Going to take me out?' Nan got to her feet quickly.

'What about him?' pointing at Rex.

The man shook his head. 'He stays.'

'But we can't leave him here alone.'

'The hell we can't? What'll stop us?'

'Why, he will die. Don't you understand? We can't leave him there.'

'He stays, do yuh sabe that? I'll take you out.'

'Go ahead, Nan,' panted Rex. 'You — you can tell where I am, don't you see?'

'A hell of a lot of good it'll do,' laughed the man. He pointed at the circling buzzards meaningly. Nan knew what he meant, and her face went white.

'I won't go without him,' she said firmly.

'Yuh won't? Well, I'll be damned! What's the idea? Are you — aw, have a little sense, can'tcha? No use of both of yuh cashin' in down here. I'm willin' to take yuh out, and you act like a fool over

this white-faced jigger. I don't git yore idea. What does he amount to, anyway?'

'If he stays — I stay.'

Nan's eyes were filled with tears, but her voice was firm. The man came closer to her, peering through his mask.

'You ain't gone loco, have yuh?'

'No, I am perfectly sane.'

'And you'd give up a chance to git home safe — for that?' He pointed disgustedly at Rex.

'I — I'll stay with him,' she said chokingly.

'Well, f'r God's sake!'

The man looked around, as though asking the wide world if the girl wasn't crazy. He looked at Nan and at Rex, who was watching Nan, wide-eyed.

'Of all the loco things I ever heard of,' grunted the man. 'Listen, sister: is this on the square? Would you give up — say, don'tcha know there ain't a chance of yuh ever gettin' out of here unless somebody guides yuh? You'll die here, and the buzzards will strip yore bones. Do yuh realize that? Do yuh? And still you'd stay with that damn weak-kneed tenderfoot? Slough off a chance to git home safe? Yuh would? Well, I'd like to know why.'

'Because,' said Nan wearily, 'I love him.'

The man jerked forward. 'You what? You love *him?* You love ——'

'I have told you why I will stay,' said Nan. 'If he stays here, I stay, too.'

'Well, good God!' exploded the man. 'With all the reg'lar men in the State of Arizona — you pick that.'

He moved back and sat down on the rock, where he rolled another cigarette, only to toss it aside. After a long silence he said softly:

'Well, I'll be damned!'

'Won't you cut him loose?' begged Nan. 'Can't you see those ropes are cutting him?'

'Pretty soft-skinned. Why in hell didn't he stay where he belonged?'

But he made no move to release Rex; he was studying Nan, humped on the rock, her hands between her knees, as she looked at Rex, her eyes filled with tears.

Finally the masked man got to his feet, looking down at Rex.

'I ain't got the sense that Gawd gave geese in Ireland,' he said slowly. 'I've knowed lotsa married folks, and I've had me a girl once or twicet; but I never knowed that any damn woman ever cared enough f'r a man to slough off a chance to save her life — f'r him.' He stepped over to Rex and quickly unfastened the ropes.

'You're not going to leave him here?' asked Nan, hardly believing that such was his intention.

'Not if yuh want him that damn bad. T' me, he don't amount to a damn, and I'd jist as soon use him for buzzard bait as not; but if you — you two wait here. I've got to git my bronc. There's a way out the lower end of this cañon, if I can remember it. It's a long ways around, but it can't be helped.'

He picked up his rope, swung it over his arm, grasped his rifle, and went stumbling up the cañon, while Nan and Rex stood there, looking at each other.

'Thank God!' breathed Nan.

'Did you mean what you told him, Nan? Did you mean that you love me?'

'Well, I would have stayed,' she said simply.

Hashknife had little trouble in following Morgan, although Morgan seemed to be traveling more by guess than from any pretense of following a trail. It was so steep that a horse was obliged to almost sit on his rump and keep angling from one side to another to keep from going headlong into the cañon.

About halfway down the side of the cañon, Hashknife's gray horse shoved loose a boulder of considerable size, which went bounding down the steep slope, crashing through the brush, and splitting itself on the boulders at the bottom.

Hashknife realized that Dave Morgan would have to be deaf not to have heard it; but there was

no turning back now. He was riding the rump of the gray, his feet drawn back as far as possible to escape the brush.

Slipping and sliding, careening from side to side, the tall gray took him safely to the bottom of the cañon, where he dismounted. He had lost Morgan's trail, and there did not seem to be any way of recovering it. The bottom of the cañon at this point was a jumble of broken sandstone, boulders, and brush, which seemed an impassable barrier to man and beast; but Hashknife knew there must be a way out.

The cañon was about six miles in length, and Hashknife had entered it at about a mile below the north end. After waiting a while, trying to figure out where Morgan had gone, Hashknife picked up his reins and started trying to pick out a route down the cañon.

It was slow traveling. Time after time he was obliged to retrace his steps and select a new route. For over a mile he managed to find his way. But he was paying for it. His overall-clad legs were flapping rags, and the knees of the tall gray were torn and bleeding.

'Tough goin', Ghost,' grinned Hashknife. 'If we ever go the length of this cañon, we deserve a medal.'

At last he came to a place where he could not find

a way through. The cañon narrowed to a box-like affair, not over sixty feet in width, with perpendicular sides, a hundred feet high.

Back went Hashknife and the gray horse to a point about three hundred yards away, where they began climbing the east side of the cañon. It was slow work, but they managed to get above the perpendicular sides of the box cañon.

And it was here that Hashknife was rewarded for his labor. Cut deeply in the side of the hill were the tracks of a horse which had come down the side of the cañon at this point. Hashknife studied the situation, and from his point of view Dave Morgan had cut back to the top of the cañon again, and had tried the descent at another place.

But this time Hashknife was careful to follow the tracks, which kept to the side of the hill, until reaching the sheer cliffs, less than a mile above where Nan and Rex had found the cave, where they descended again to the bottom of the cañon. Hashknife stopped near the cliffs and scanned the country. Far above him and across the cañon, he could see the tiny scars which indicated graded curves on the wagon road. Far down the cañon he could see a few buzzards, spiraling upward from the cañon bed.

That was where he wanted to go — down where the buzzards were. It was another hard slide down

the cañon, but they made it in safety. For some distance the trail led down the bottom of the cañon, where the tracks in the sand made it easy to follow the spoor of the other horse.

The buzzards were getting closer all the time. Again the trail led from the bottom, and Hashknife was obliged to dismount to follow, leading his horse. The last few hundred yards required nearly an hour to negotiate, and he suddenly broke through the brush on the very spot where the buzzards had been feeding on the roan horse from the 6 × 6, across the cañon bottom from the cave.

Hashknife watched the big birds leave their meal, and then examined the carcass. He found the strip of skin, which carried the 6 × 6 brand, and he sat down to ponder over it. There was no question in his mind that this horse had slid down from the grades, as the bones of the legs were broken, and, as far as he was able to determine, the neck had also been broken. The saddle bore no name, and had been badly damaged.

Hashknife left the carcass and tied his horse to a snag. Sliding down into the bottom of the cañon, he discovered Nan's tracks, which were very plain. This proved to him that Nan was still alive, and he heaved a sigh of satisfaction. Fifty feet farther down the cañon he found the empty revolver, where the masked man had thrown it. From the way it

had skidded in the sand, he knew it had been thrown from the west side of the cañon.

Hashknife felt sure that neither Nan nor Rex had been armed when they left the ranch; and this gun, with six empty shells in the cylinder, proved that some one had been doing some shooting in the cañon.

He climbed the west bank and came out almost under the overhang of the cave. After a careful survey of the surrounding country, he climbed up over the shelves of sandstone to the entrance of the cave.

Here was an odor of wood-smoke, although the fire had long since died out. Cautiously he advanced into the shallow cave, gun in hand. It was light enough for him to see the outstretched form of Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs near the pile of ashes.

He had been tied securely with a length of lariat-rope, with the loop drawn tightly around his neck. Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs was as dead as a man might be, and Hashknife could see that he had died from strangulation, although he had been badly battered.

Hashknife loosened the ropes. In spite of the battered face, Hashknife was able to recognize the old 6 × 6 cook. On the left side of his head was a furrow which seemed to have been made by a bullet,

but with so many cuts and bruises it was difficult to say which was the worst.

The old man's coat had been almost torn from his body, but in the inside pocket Hashknife found several folded papers, which he took to the cave entrance to examine.

For perhaps five minutes he sat on a sandstone ledge, pondering deeply over them, while the shadows of the buzzards drifted back and forth across the slope below him.

Finally he pocketed the papers and went back into the cave, where he dragged the old man's body farther away from the entrance.

'Mebby you'll be a mummy by the time yuh get out of here, old-timer,' he said. 'I'd take yuh out, if I could; but I can't. So-long.'

Hashknife went back down the slope, where he found the track of a horse, going down the cañon. It went down past the old waterfall, where the tracks were plainly outlined in the sand.

'Must be a way out the lower end,' he decided. 'If I can get Ghost down into this danged place, I'll try my luck. It can't be any worse than the way I came in — and it must be shorter.'

He managed to pick out a possible place to get down, and went back for the gray horse.

CHAPTER XIX

HASHKNIFE WRITES A NOTE

THE shadows from the mesquite clumps were growing long on the mesa below the mouth of Coyote Cañon. Farther to the south was the blue haze over the flat land toward Cañonville. Blue quail were calling to one another from the brushy slopes, their plaintive, *ca cuckoo, ca cuckoo*, being the only sound to break the silence.

A lean coyote, like a gray shadow, came limping along past a mesquite, where he stopped in the shade, his ears cocked toward the sound of feeding quail. A brush rabbit rustled in the mesquite, and the coyote shifted his head quickly. Suddenly he lifted his nose. Down the wind came a scent which he quickly associated with men who carried gun and lariat ropes. More like a shadow than before, the coyote seemed to fade out of sight through a convenient cover, while from a spot upwind came the soft crackling of brush.

First came the masked man, leading the bay horse, with Nan in the saddle. Behind them — quite a way behind them — came Rex Morgan, staggering along, looking like a rag-man, or rather a man of rags.

The masked man stopped the horse and allowed Rex to join them.

'Hell of a trip, huh?' grunted the man. 'Well, here's where I leave yuh.'

He pointed up the slope. 'About half a mile up thataway yuh strike the road. Turn left for Mesa City.'

Nan dismounted and stood beside Rex, while the masked man mounted his horse.

'I'd like to thank you,' she said.

'Yuh don't need to. Yore sweetheart shore looks fagged, don't he? You ain't a very good picker, ma'am. Them shoes he's wearin' wasn't built f'r Coyote Cañon. Good luck to yuh. I don't sabe women — not a-tall. So long.'

He spurred his horse to a gallop, and soon disappeared, traveling south. Nan and Rex looked foolishly at each other. Rex's shoes were ready to fall off his feet, which were bleeding. Nan was a little better off, because she had ridden the horse, but her face was drawn from suffering and lack of food.

'We've got to walk home,' she said. Rex nodded, shifting his feet painfully, and they started toward the road.

Rex was game. Every step was torture, but he gritted his teeth and kept going. They were both staggering before they reached the road, and Rex

was laughing foolishly as they sat down to gain a little strength before attempting the steep grades.

'I haven't any feeling,' said Rex weakly. 'My legs and arms belong to some one else, I think.'

'And your feet are all blood, Rex.'

'I know. But we are out of that terrible cañon. Everything will be all right now, Nan. I want to sing, but I can't think of a single song. It is like waking up from an awful dream. I wonder who that man is, Nan? What was he doing in that cañon, and why did he want to leave me there, all tied up in that rope?

'It all seems so ridiculous — now. I have never harmed any one in my life, except the clothing clerk in Northport, Spike Cahill, and the crazy man. And they couldn't really hold any grudge for that, because it was in self-defense. Queer country out here. Somebody always trying to kill somebody else. But I — I like it, Nan.'

She did not reply. After a few moments he turned his head and looked at her. She was leaning against a rock, sound asleep, her hands folded in her lap. He sighed and shifted to a more comfortable position.

It was nearly dark when something awoke Rex. He lifted his head quickly, trying to understand what it was all about; trying to realize where he was. A great, gray shape loomed over him in the

half-light, and there was the creak of saddle-leather, the jingle of spurs.

Then he heard the voice of Hashknife Hartley saying:

'You poor kid, this is Hashknife.'

But Hashknife wasn't talking to him, he was talking to Nan. And the great, gray shape was Ghost, which nuzzled at him.

Nan was crying and Hashknife was patting her on the shoulder, telling her that everything was all right. Rex staggered around the horse to Hashknife, and the tall cowboy put an arm around his shoulders.

'I trailed yuh out of the cañon,' said Hashknife. 'My God, what a trail! You're all right now, Nan. How 'r yuh comin', Rex?'

'I don't know,' confessed Rex weakly. 'I've got so many sore spots that I am just one big ache. Are you all right, Nan?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she replied wearily. 'I must have gone to sleep, you see.'

'Well, that's all right,' laughed Hashknife. 'I'll boost yuh up on Ghost, and we'll head for home.'

He picked Nan up in his arms and placed her in the saddle.

'I'll give yuh a leg up, Rex,' he said. 'You ride behind Nan. Ghost is broke to ride double.'

'But you can't walk all the way,' protested Nan.

'Can't I? Shucks, I could walk to the moon right now.'

He helped Rex on behind the saddle, and they went on up the winding grades, while Nan told Hashknife the story of what had happened to them from the time some one shot Rex's horse until they left the masked man on the mesa.

'I thought you'd see the buzzards,' said Rex.

'I seen 'em. Gosh, what an experience yuh had!'

'I — I think Rex went crazy for a while,' said Nan. 'When he fought with the crazy man.'

'Did yuh tie him up after the fight?' asked Hashknife.

'We didn't have anything to tie him with,' said Rex. 'But he never tried to get up, you see.'

'Uh-huh.'

The moon was up when they reached the spot where Rex and Nan had dropped into the cañon. It silvered the hills and the cliffs on the opposite side of the cañon.

'Oh, we forgot about the crazy man!' exclaimed Nan. 'He's still down there in the cave, you know, Hashknife.'

'Don't worry about him, Nan.'

They plodded on around the grades, down around the sharp turns, where the stage had given Rex his wild introduction to the country, and on through

the flat land to the forks of the road, where they turned to the Lane ranch.

The ranch-house was dark.

'Queer, isn't it?' said Rex. 'When I was asleep back there, I dreamed about that Navajo rug. It had blood on it — in my dream, Hashknife.'

'Yeah. It ain't on the fence down there now; somebody took it.'

'Oh, I'll bet your feet are worn raw,' said Nan. 'With those high-heel boots on.'

'Feet are all right. Here we are.'

Rex slid down, and Hashknife lifted Nan from the saddle.

The kitchen table was just as Hashknife and Sleepy had left it, after the bullet had driven the milk can between Sleepy's eyes. Both Nan and Rex were still wobbling, and watched Hashknife build a fire in the kitchen stove. He put on a big kettle of water.

'I can get the meal,' said Nan. 'I feel fine again.'

'Start in with some coffee, Nan. There's half of that pie in the oven. I could drink a pot of coffee myself. Show me where yuh keep yore writin' paper and ink, will yuh, Nan?'

They found it in the drawer of the table in the living-room, along with an old pen.

'You fix the coffee,' said Hashknife. 'I've got to write a note.'

He placed a lamp on the table, while Nan went back to the kitchen where Rex was removing what was left of his shoes. Hashknife took a folded piece of paper from his pocket, propped it up against a book, and filled his pen.

He wrote slowly on the cheap sheet of paper; so slowly that it appeared as though he might be copying something. His brow was knitted deeply, almost covering the gray eyes, as the broken penholder moved slowly in his cramped fingers.

Finally it was finished to his satisfaction, and after folding it roughly he placed it in the inside pocket of his vest. The paper he had propped against the book went into a hip pocket, and he got up from the table, a half-smile on his thin lips.

Nan was limping around the table in the kitchen, while Rex looked ruefully at his swollen feet.

'I'll have some hot water for you in a few minutes, honey,' said Nan.

Rex looked up quickly at Hashknife. It was the first time she had ever called him by that title. The gray eyes shifted to Nan and back to Rex. Neither of them had told Hashknife just why the masked man had taken them out of the cañon. Perhaps it was a subject that neither of them cared to discuss with a third party.

Came the sound of running horses, the thump of footsteps on the rickety porch, and Sleepy came

stomping through the living-room, while behind him came Lem Sheeley. At sight of Nan, Sleepy let out a joyful yelp and grabbed Hashknife by the shoulders.

'Where didja find 'em?' he yelled. 'My Gawd, this is great, ain't it? Where yuh been? Look at the kid's feet, will yuh? Why don't somebody say somethin'? All dumb, are yuh?'

'Are yuh run down?' queried Hashknife mildly.

'Well — yeah!' snorted Sleepy. 'Talk a little.'

Both Sleepy and Lem crowded into the kitchen and humped on their heels against the wall while Hashknife told what he knew and what Nan and Rex had told him. The coffee-pot boiled over before the tale was told, but no one noticed such small details.

'But what's it all about?' complained Lem. 'There ain't head nor tail to it. All this crazy man in the cañon and a man with a mask stuff. Sounds kinda looney to me.'

'It does sound crazy,' smiled Hashknife.

'Like a sheep-herder's dream,' grunted Sleepy. 'After we left you we spent about three hours tryin' to find a way down into that damn cañon, but had to give up. It's one awful place, Hashknife. I don't sabe how you ever found a place to get in. Me and Lem had an idea of tryin' to get down at the lower end, but gave it up until we heard from you.'

'Where are the other boys?' asked Hashknife.

'Mesa City, gettin' their bills wet,' grunted Sleepy. 'Spike Cahill dang near broke his neck in that cañon. He thought he could slide a hundred feet down a thirty-foot rope, but found it was too short on one end.'

Nan poured the coffee and refilled the pot. She and Rex split the half pie, while Rex bathed his feet in warm water. He was too tired even to tell them if the water was too hot, and Sleepy almost cooked him with it.

'Well, what next?' asked Lem, finishing his coffee.

Hashknife shoved his cup aside and got to his feet.

'I reckon we'll go back to Mesa City,' he said.

Sleepy eyed him closely, knowing that something real had caused him to make that decision. It was not merely to go to town; Hashknife's feet were too sore for a pleasure trip.

'We're with yuh, cowboy,' declared Sleepy. 'My God, yore feet must be tender.'

'Not a bit; can't feel anythin'.'

He turned to Nan. 'Better go to bed pretty quick, and don't worry any more. Fix up the kid's feet the best yuh can, and they'll be all right. C'mon, boys.'

He limped from the house to his horse, with the

two men close behind him. Ghost nickered softly and rubbed his muzzle against Hashknife's vest.

'Can't travel very fast,' said Hashknife. 'That cañon is shore hell on a horse. There's places where Ghost had to almost crawl on his knees. Yuh shore need sky-hooks and a lot of faith in the Almighty to make that trip.'

CHAPTER XX

IN THE SMOKE OF A FORTY-FIVE

It was rather a big night at the Oasis, as far as the bar was concerned. Morgan was helping the overworked bartender, while Mesa City discussed what had become of Nan and Rex. Hashknife, too, had not been accounted for, but Spike Cahill declared that Hashknife could take care of himself.

'But he never got into that damn cañon,' said Cal Dickenson, of Dave Morgan's outfit. 'I tell yuh, it can't be done.'

'The hell it can't!' snorted Spike. 'I was jist one inch of goin' into it myself to-day. A *hondo* on that rope was all that saved me. A inch ain't far, Cal.'

The boys laughed with Spike. They knew just how close he had come to smashing his bones on the rocks.

Joe Cave came in from the Flying M and joined the gang. Joe was cold-sober now, but willing to be otherwise.

'It's too damn lonesome out there,' he told Morgan. 'You didn't tell me that all the rest of the gang had left.'

'I did, too,' said Morgan. 'Mebby you was too drunk to pay any attention.'

'Mebby,' grinned Joe sourly. 'Gimme whiskey.'

'Whatsa matter?' asked Spike, watching Joe gulp down a glass of liquor. 'Is yore swallerin' apparatus busted? I'll leave it to anybody around here if Joe's Adam's-apple didn't jump sideways to let that drink jump past.'

'His Adam's-apple ain't so damn dumb,' said Bert Roddy solemnly. 'It knows what it means to git in front of a runaway drink of Oasis liquor. Sleepy Stevens says the only safe way is to drink quick and shut your mouth. He says that kinda whiskey bounces.'

'Where's Sleepy?' asked a cowboy.

'Him and Lem pulled out about an hour ago.'

'What was Lem doin' here?' asked Joe Cave.

'Prob'ly lookin' for you,' grinned Spike. 'He shore did look sad. Mebby he mourns his loss.'

'I s'pose he does,' grinned Joe. 'That's a hell of a job, packin' food to a prisoner. I'm glad I quit.'

'Yea-a-ah — you quit!' flared Bert Roddy. 'You got drunk, and he fired yuh, Joe.'

Joe grimaced and reached for the bottle.

'I suppose that's what Lem said.'

'Yeah, and he don't lie,' declared Spike.

Joe glared at Spike, but dropped the argument. He had no desire to tangle with that ex-6 × 6 gang.

'How about a little poker?' suggested Dave Morgan.

'Very little for me,' replied Dell Bowen. 'I'm almost broke enough to take a job with yuh, Dave.'

'That's fine with me; I can use yuh.'

Morgan left the bar and began arranging a check-rack on one of the tables when Hashknife limped in, followed by Sleepy and Lem.

'There's the old cañon-crawler now!' whooped Spike.

Hashknife smiled thinly and looked around, nodding to the men. Morgan halted with a stack of chips in his hand.

'Just in time, Hartley,' he said. 'Grab a seat.'

'Didja get down into the cañon?' asked Spike.

'I shore did,' smiled Hashknife.

'F'r gosh sake, where? Did Sleepy tell yuh the trouble we had? Where'd yuh get down?'

'Morgan showed me the place.'

All eyes were turned to Dave Morgan. He placed his chips on the table and looked at Hashknife.

'Did you foller me down?' he asked easily.

'I did.'

'Well, I'll be darned. After you boys left here, I got an idea that there might be a place to get down; so I rode down and tried it. I never knew anybody was follerin' me. Sure, I got down. But I couldn't get anywhere; so I went north ag'in, and finally gave it up.'

Hashknife's eyes narrowed slightly.

'I see,' he said thoughtfully. 'That's how I missed yore trail down there. But I found a way through.'

'The hell yuh did!' exploded Spike. 'What'd yuh find?'

Hashknife's eyes traveled slowly over the crowd.

'I found a blue-roan 6 × 6 horse, with a saddle on it. The buzzards found it first, but there was enough left.'

'Blue-roan?' queried Bert Roddy. 'Was it Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs's blue-roan?'

'I think so, Bert.'

'Where's old Briggs?' demanded Morgan. 'I want to get my hands on that old thief. He opened that safe ——'

'Briggs is dead,' interrupted Hashknife. 'He had been all battered up, and I think a bullet had scored his head. I found him down there in a cave, with a tight rope around his neck — jist buzzard-bait.'

For several moments there was silence, broken by Spike's 'My God!'

Sleepy moved back slightly, his right hand brushing over his gun-butt.

'He was drunk when he left here,' said Bert Roddy. 'He must 'a' rode off the grade. Poor old Briggs.'

'Do yuh think he shot himself and then choked

himself to death with the rope?' asked Hashknife slowly.

'Oh, I forgot that,' said Bert. 'He couldn't have done all that, Hartley.'

'Sounds foolish,' said Dave Morgan.

'The body is down there in a cave to prove it.'

'Oh, I'm not disputin' yore word, Hartley.'

'And last night,' said Hashknife slowly, 'somebody shot Rex Morgan's horse on the Coyote Cañon grade, while him and Nan Lane was ridin' to Cañonville. They kept shootin', and drove the kid and the girl over the edge, where they slid all the way to the bottom. God only knows how they lived.

'I reckon they had a hell of a time. Briggs was down there, crazy as a loon. He stuck 'em up with a gun and took the girl to a cave; but the kid follered and whipped Briggs, knockin' him out cold. I reckon it bumped Briggs's head pretty hard, 'cause he didn't wake up the last they saw of him.

'But they never roped him.'

Hashknife paused to let this soak in.

'You mean, there was somebody else down there?' asked Lem hoarsely.

'A masked man,' said Hashknife. 'He choked Briggs to death with the rope, and then brought them two kids out to the south mesa, where he left 'em. I found 'em down there, all fagged out, and brought 'em home.'

'What masked man?' demanded Dave Morgan. 'Talk sense.'

'The man who shot Rex Morgan's horse last night. The same man who shot Noah Evans on the porch of the Lane ranch-house, Morgan; shot him, thinkin' it was the tenderfoot kid. The same man who fired a shot through the window at the Lane ranch-house last night, and almost killed Sleepy Stevens.'

'There's been quite a lot goin' on around here, it seems to me,' said Joe Cave, laughing shortly.

'But yore explanation don't tell us anythin',' said Dave Morgan, stepping away from the table.

'It told me quite a lot,' said Hashknife. 'But there's more to it than that, folks. Did any of yuh examine the spot where yuh thought Peter Morgan was killed? Well, yuh might 'a' been surprised. There wasn't any blood spilled there. Peter Morgan was dead long before he came to that place.

'And the man, or men, who brought him there, killed him in the 6 × 6 ranch-house on a Navajo rug, which has a lightnin' mark on it. To remove the blood, they took rug and all with 'em.

'And when they was gettin' away, that tenderfoot kid rode in on 'em, and they popped him over the head. They thought they had killed him, and took him along to the Lane ranch. They sunk the

rug in the creek. And when they knew we had found the rug — they stole it.'

The men were all staring at Hashknife, whose face was drawn, his lips almost white.

'Cave!' he snapped. 'You made a mistake this mornin'. You should have been just as drunk outside of town as yuh was in it.'

Joe Cave flinched, as though some one had seared him with a hot iron.

'You've got mask-marks on yore face, Cave!' Hashknife's voice snapped like a whip.

With a jerk of his hand, Cave started to reach for his face, but sagged back against the bar.

'And you made a mistake, Morgan,' whispered Hashknife. 'Why didn't yuh kill Briggs on flat ground, so yuh could search him, instead of shooting him off the grade into the cañon, where you couldn't get at him? He had somethin' in his pocket that you needed bad.'

Joe Cave was the first to act. As he sagged back against the bar, his right hand flashed down to his gun. He was trapped. Morgan's gun was coming out like a flash, but his bullet ripped into the floor, echoing the crash of Sleepy's forty-five.

Cave sprang away from the bar, screaming a curse, with Spike Cahill, clinging like grim death to his gun-hand. Lem shot across the space, knocking the table aside, and threw one arm around

Cave's neck, shutting off his wind, while Spike tore away the gun.

Morgan went to his knees, blindly groping for the gun, which had fallen from his nerveless hand, but Hashknife kicked it aside, and Morgan sprawled on his face. They flung Cave into a chair and Lem handcuffed him, while Cave cursed them bitterly.

One of the men ran for the doctor, but Lem turned Morgan over to discover that a doctor was not needed. Hashknife patted Sleepy on the back and leaned against the bar.

'Dead, is he?' gritted Joe Cave.

'You're lucky not to be with him,' said Spike nervously.

'Like hell, I am! Why didn't he live long enough to tell the truth? Nobody will believe me. Dave killed Pete. I was out there with him.

'He didn't go to kill him; he went to borrow money. I wasn't even in the house. He wouldn't lend Dave money; so Dave killed him. I don't know how Hartley knows so damn much about it. Dave wanted to lay the blame on Lane; so we took the body there. We didn't know who that kid was, but Dave said to take him along.

'I shot Noah Evans by mistake. Dave promised to give me this saloon for helpin' him. He wanted to git rid of that tenderfoot, and yesterday we had a quarrel about it. I was afraid he'd kill me, as

soon as I done his dirty work. I shot the kid's horse on the grade, and I swiped the rug, jist before I shot through the winder. And that's all the truth.'

'And Dave Morgan robbed Pete's safe, didn't he?' asked Spike.

'Sure did. He was worried about a will. He thought old Briggs knowed too much; so he waylaid Briggs on the Coyote Cañon grade. But Briggs fell into the cañon.'

'What did you go down there for to-day?' asked Hashknife.

'To see what happened. I know that cañon like a book.'

'And you choked Briggs?'

'You found him, didn't yuh. No use of me lyin'.'

'Well, for God's sake!' blurted Lem. 'Old man Lane ain't guilty a-tall.'

'But who tied Pete on the horse?' asked Lem. 'That part of it ain't explained.'

'Nan and Rex,' said Hashknife. 'They found the body in the corral, and wanted to get rid of it. That's what made me sure Paul Lane never killed him, Lem. If he had, he'd have hid the body — not left it there to cinch him for murder.

'If there hadn't been any more shootin', I might have believed old man Lane guilty; but there was too much shootin' goin' on. The fact that Dave Morgan would inherit the 6 × 6 made me suspect

him; but he couldn't do it all alone. He had to have help, but I didn't know who to suspect.

'I never thought of Joe Cave until Lem fired him for bein' drunk.'

'Wasn't anythin' about that, was there?' asked Lem.

'A puncher,' said Hashknife slowly, 'don't usually get drunk that early in the mornin', and they don't usually take a chance on losin' a good job. It kinda looked to me as though Joe wanted to lose that job; so I rode out of town to see how he acted after he got away from town. He sobered up too quick. He had to be fired in order to make it look right. Yuh see, he was due to take over this saloon.'

'Morgan said yuh ought to be killed,' said Joe wearily.

'What did you and Morgan quarrel about down in the sheriff's office, Joe?'

'My God, did you hear that, too? He wanted me to go out to the ranch and kill Rex Morgan. I was gettin' scared. But I wanted this saloon. I heard them comin' on the grade; so I let 'em past before I shot. I never missed so bad before, but the light was awful poor.'

'Just one thing more, Cave,' said Hashknife. 'When yuh had a chance down there, why didn't yuh kill the tenderfoot?'

Joe sighed and looked at the handcuffs.

'I was a damn fool,' he said slowly. 'I don't sabe women. This 'n said she wanted the tenderfoot so bad that she'd rather stay with him than git out alone. And if you've ever been down there, where nothing much but a buzzard or a lion can git — yuh can sabe how bad she wanted him.'

'And that's why yuh brought 'em out, Joe?'

'Wasn't that enough?'

The doctor came and made an examination. He did not even open his black bag.

The crowd wanted more explanation. Hashknife drew a folded paper from his inside vest pocket and handed it to Lem, who read it, while the crowd leaned in over his wide shoulders to see what it was all about. It read:

This is mi last will — when im ded.

To Mary Morgan, mi legil wife i hearby leave the 6 × 6 ranch and everthing on it. i dont leave nuthing to Dave Morgan cause he dont diserve it.

If Mary dyes it goes to her nearist kin. To Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs i hearby give the Oasis saloon he aint got no branes so he will have to give Jack Farewether a job as long as the saloon keeps open. This is mi onley will. Yrs Respy

Peter Morgan
his X mark

P.S. wrote bi Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs oct 18 1904 because Pete Morgan cant wright.

Lem read it aloud to the men. Spike Cahill examined it, handing it back to Lem.

'That's old Briggs's writin',' he declared. 'I'd know it among a million.'

The other boys agreed with Spike.

'That's it,' said Bert Roddy. 'I know how he writes his name. But where is Pete's wife? Nobody around here knows he ever had a wife.'

'The tenderfoot is her son,' said Hashknife. 'We can prove it, can't we, Lem?'

The big sheriff nodded quickly. 'Somebody wired him when his wife died. We got a copy of the telegram.'

'Pete never got it,' said Joe Cave. 'It came to the post-office, and Dave claimed it. He knowed that the kid was Pete's son.'

'Well, it's all perfectly clear now,' said Lem. 'Ready to take a ride, Joe?'

'It ain't because I'm ready, Lem. Better get me a fresh horse. I had to circle to hell and gone across the river to get back from that mesa.'

'Let's all go down and congratulate the tenderfoot,' suggested Spike, and, when Lem took his prisoner to Cañonville, there were nine other riders who accompanied them to the forks of the road.

They rode up to the ranch-house and trooped inside, where they found Rex humped down in a

rocking-chair, his feet bandaged. Nan was in her room, but the uproar awoke her and she peered out at the wild-acting crowd.

Spike was hammering Rex on the back and trying to shake hands with him at the same time, while the bewildered Rex was trying to puzzle out what it was all about.

'Put on a blanket and come out, Nan,' advised Hashknife. 'This gang won't take no for an answer.'

Nan wrapped herself in a gaudy blanket and came timidly out. She looked like a very little and very tired Indian.

'You tell 'em, Hashknife,' said Spike.

'It's too long a tale to tell now,' said Hashknife, 'but it amounts to this, Nan: yore father will be turned loose to-morrow. Dave Morgan killed Pete Morgan, who was the father of Rex. We've cleared that all up. Dave Morgan is dead, and I found the will that gives Rex the 6 × 6.'

'You mean — my dad is free?' asked Nan.

'Jist as soon as they can unlock the jail, Nan.'

She stood there in front of them, the blanket tucked up around her chin, crying. There was no effort to hide the tears. The cowboys turned away.

'Hell!' snorted Spike.

'What are you kickin' about?' growled Bert.

'Somebody stepped on my foot.'

'Ain't been anybody within six feet of yuh.'

'And I — I own the 6 × 6?' asked Rex foolishly.

'Yuh shore do!' exclaimed Spike. 'It's yore ranch, kid.'

Rex blinked at them foolishly. 'And Peter Morgan was my father? It was he who sent that check to my mother?'

'I reckon it was Briggs,' said Hashknife. 'Peter Morgan didn't want anybody to know; so he had Briggs send the checks.'

'Was he ashamed of my mother?'

'I dunno. We'll never know, Rex; they're both gone. You be content with what he left yuh.'

Rex nodded dumbly. He could hardly understand his great fortune. The boys came and shook hands with him. They all wanted to shake hands with Nan, but she had slipped away to her room. The boys filed out of the house, mounted their horses, and headed back to Mesa City. Hashknife yawned wearily and started for the door.

'Hashknife,' said Rex slowly, 'I don't understand anything. I know you are the one responsible for all this good fortune, but I can't think of just what to say. If, as you say, the 6 × 6 belongs to me — will you take charge of it? I don't know anything about it. I'd like to hire all those boys.'

'Well, I dunno. Might work out thataway, Rex. We've got to put up our horses now.'

He and Sleepy stabled their mounts and gave them a feed of oats. As they closed the stable door, Sleepy said:

'How much of that will is true, Hashknife?'

'How much?' Hashknife hesitated for several moments.

'Yore fingers are all stained with ink, cowboy.'

Hashknife chuckled softly. 'Some day, you'll be a detective, Sleepy. C'mere.'

They backed against the stable, where Hashknife took a crumpled piece of paper from his hip pocket. He scratched a match and held the paper for Sleepy to read. The writing was identical with that of the other will, but read:

This is mi last will — when im ded.

To Mary Morgan, legal wife of Dave Morgan i hearby give the 6 × 6 ranch to own. i dont give nothing to Dave Morgan he dont deserve it.

If Mary dyes it goes to her nearist kin. To Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs I hearby give the Oasis saloon he aint got no branes so he will have to give Jack Farewether a job as long as the saloon keeps open. This is mi onely will.

Yrs Respy
Peter Morgan
his X Mark

P.S. wrote bi Napoleon Bonaparte Briggs oct 18 1904 because Pete Morgan cant wright.

Hashknife was obliged to light a second match, before Sleepy could finish reading the document, and, as Sleepy straightened up with a soft whistle of astonishment, Hashknife touched the match to a corner of the paper and they watched it burn to crinkly ashes.

'I wrote that other will, Sleepy,' said Hashknife slowly. 'It works out the same way, as far as the property is concerned. But when a young man is slated to marry a danged sweet young lady, and don't know anythin' about his paternal ancestor, why not start him off right, as far as his father is concerned?'

'That's right,' said Sleepy softly. 'It don't hurt nobody. Look at that, will yuh?'

Silhouetted against the ranch-house window were two figures, about a foot apart. One figure greatly resembled a blanketed Indian, the other a scarecrow, with rags dangling from its arms, making queer motions.

Sleepy laughed softly. 'Look at him, will yuh? He's probably tellin' her in good English what he's goin' to do with the 6×6. Betcha he ain't even kissed her. Hashknife, that feller is almost dumb enough to make a good cowpuncher.'

Suddenly the figures blended, and Hashknife turned his back as he fumbled for his cigarette-papers.

'Not so dumb,' he said slowly.

'Well, that one is over,' chuckled Sleepy.

'Good. Now, I can heat some water and soak my blisters.'

They pulled their hats low over their eyes and headed for the kitchen door.

THE END

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 10025 535 3

The Morgan Trail

by W. C. Tuttle

A Hashknife Hartley Story

THICKER THAN WATER

By W. C. Tuttle

HASHKNIFE HARTLEY, ingenious, whimsical, patient, cool, daring, and a little mysterious, rides over the prairie rim to the town of Red Arrow. Sleepy Stevens rides at his side — a shy Sancho Panza, devoted and puzzled, but a strong arm and a quick trigger-finger at need.

Red Arrow is a trifle excited. The Wells Fargo messenger has been held up and relieved of $132,000. 'Slim' Caldwell, the sheriff, welcomes Hashknife's aid in solving the problem, and the resulting adventures of Hashknife and Sleepy are many and thrilling.

The son of an old-time border sheriff, Tuttle knows his people and his scenes from the inside out. In this breathless tale, he has given his readers not only a most ingenious detective story, but an accurate and living picture of the ranch and the frontier town.

Mystery and Adventure

THE MORGAN TRAIL *By* W. C. TUTTLE

Another Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens story of the cattle country, by the author of 'Thicker than Water.' W. C. Tuttle is the son of an old-time border sheriff and his stories are both true to life and uncommonly exciting.

AT THE HOUSE OF DREE *By* GORDON GARDINER

A story of the British Secret Service during the War and of thrilling adventures in spy-hunting on the coast of Scotland.

THE MAD MASQUERADE *By* KENYON GAMBIER

A young American in Paris innocently impersonates an English lord and finds himself involved in an amazing series of adventures.

ROMAN GOLD *By* MICHAEL LEWIS

Honest wits are matched against evil in this swiftly moving story of intrigue and strange adventures in the English countryside.

INTERFERENCE *By* ROLAND PERTWEE

One of the most successful plays of the season — a tale of murder and mystery in London society — is here presented in story form.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY